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# Troubled

Solomohn Nallshi Ennis-Klyczek

*Eastern Illinois University*

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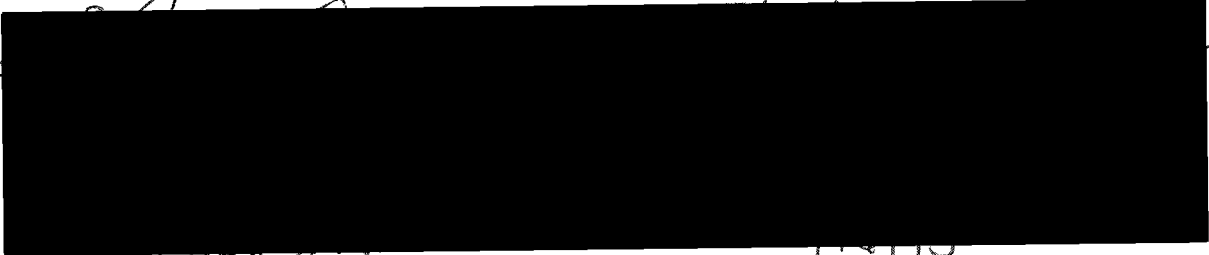
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Troubled

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(TITLE)

BY

Solomohn Nalshi Ennis-Klyczek

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**THESIS**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF

**Master of Arts in English**

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IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY  
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

2015

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YEAR

I HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THIS THESIS BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING  
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This book is a work of fiction. Characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

*For my brothers and sisters of every complexion  
and persuasion who are committed to the struggle.*

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## Critical Introduction for Creative Thesis Project:

*Troubled*

In response to data that states one-in-four girls and one-in-six boys are victims of sexual abuse, sexual abuse that is typically perpetrated upon them by people in their inner social and familial circles, constant attention being given to this societal problem is warranted (CDC).<sup>1</sup> Further complicating this urgent matter is the massive number of adults and juveniles who **exit** penal institutions **that** report one-in-ten of their inmates have been sexually assaulted while incarcerated (Bureau of Justice Statistics). Often these inmates are re-integrated into communities without adequate health, mental, and spiritual care. This creates a larger problem than the existing one when we include the factor that said persons are rejoining a society filled with single parents, too busy guardians, and blurred lines concerning sexuality.

Working from the axiom that hurting people hurt people, it is with great fear and concern for the well-being of society, our children, and the adults and young adults who commit sexual crimes (specifically, against children) that the purpose for my novel, *Troubled*, was conceived. *Troubled* is a Christian horror novel that explores the depths of sexual trauma, investigates its spiritual origins, and challenges opinions that support an overarching “unhealable” belief typically prescribed to human beings who **struggle** with pedophilic desires.<sup>2</sup> With intellectual and structural leanings upon cognitive and

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<sup>1</sup> Sexual abuse is defined by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) as an adult or person at least 5 years older touching or fondling in a sexual way a child’s body including any sexually-related oral, anal, or vaginal contact.

<sup>2</sup> As stated in *DSM V*: Over a period of at least 6 months, recurrent, intense sexually arousing fantasies, sexual urges, or behaviors involving sexual activity with a prepubescent child, and pubescent children generally aged 13 years or younger; or recurrent and intense sexual arousal from prepubescent or pubescent children; equal or greater arousal from such children than from physically mature individuals. Specific types follow: Pedophilic type: sexually attracted to prepubescent children (generally younger than 11);



rhetorical theories of narrative, buttressed by ethnographic and biopsychosocial research, the scholarly motivation for *Troubled* is to create a literary portrait of, and rhetorical device for, exploring the cathartic, metacognitive, and healing possibilities of narrative therapy.<sup>3</sup>

*Troubled* is motivated by the idea that with the proper tools and a corrected frame of mind people can change. One tool that is utilized within this project is narrative therapy. Narrative Therapy Specialist Alan Carr underscores the importance of re-authoring pathologizing discourses and narratives, which maintain rather than lighten the burden of people dealing with difficulties (486). One of the primary objectives of *Troubled* is to allow readers who are **plagued** by sexual trauma the opportunity to think about their trauma in relation to *Troubled's* case studies based narrative, and in doing so illuminate darkened intellectual spaces that are essential to the healing process.

According to research conducted by narrative therapists and cognitive literary studies, “we form relationships with narrative[s]” (Wojciehowski and Gallese 2; Carr). Thus, the act of reading has been proven to have the ability to influentially engage the imagination; to the degree that, the material being consumed shapes our worldview, feelings, and thoughts about self. As a trauma narrative, *Troubled* affords its readers moments of psychological and emotional reflection and respite; in hopes that, those

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hebephilic type—sexually attracted to pubescent children (generally age 11 through 14); pedohebephilic type—sexually attracted to both.

<sup>3</sup> By incorporating the plausible and the familiar, and using what is ordinary (based on the ethnographical research), it is hoped for that the text will resonate with the reader, and that the reader will trust the narrative enough to wholly participate bodily, emotionally and intellectually in the story-world. *Troubled* also makes use of the principles of affective narratology and universal narrative prototypes, which are dutifully fitted into the concepts of Feeling of Body and Theory of Mind by way of incorporating emotion systems that are informed by ethnographic research and the meaning-making patterns of *Troubled's* selected audiences.

moments will bridge gaps that have obstructed the building of healthier, life-affirming schemas.

*Troubled's* narrative is based on years of research, projects, and personal experiences. Authenticity and sincerity are especially important components of *Troubled* because believability, and intersections of emotional and intellectual commonality are essential to the forming of the reader/narrative relationship. *Troubled* has been purposed and designed to allow readers an escape into a text world that is familiar yet different. Reader investment in the text world will in turn free up mental space, create distance, and allow for objectivity. During this inspired reader/literary moment, the reader can engage in identifying destructive behaviors and modes of thinking, *and* engage in becoming agents in their own recovery, habilitation, and re-authoring.

To avoid creating a meaningless text based on insignificant tropes and “distorted caricatures,” as an author, I have assumed the role of portraitist (13). I employ portraiture as the literary methodological framework for *Troubled*. Dr. Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot states the portraitist, deepens the conversation and broadens the audience; inevitably creating acts of narrative-based interventions with the intent of engaging in acts of social transformation by documenting “the specifics, the nuance, the detailed description,” and ultimately illuminating universal patterns (12).

The use of portraiture was especially useful in the development of *Troubled's* characters and their interactions. For example, a variety of characters wrestle with finding a way to hate the sin without condemning the sinner in their process of trying to maintain healthy relationships and positive outlooks for those who have perpetrated the morally reprehensible crime that is child sexual abuse. This particular moral and spiritual battle is

especially evident within the character-space of *Troubled's* hero, Kevin McCall. Kevin is the father of Mace Johnson. Mace is a seventeen-year-old black male who has become entrapped by thoughts, behaviors, and subconscious impulses that have influenced him to commit pedophilic acts. Kevin using his training as a clinical therapist objectively and respectfully assesses Mace's abhorrent actions with his friend and dentist, Dr. Regina.

The narrative states,

Thinking as a clinician, Kevin was further disturbed by [Mace's] overtly opportunistic predatory behavior. Both being mature and aware people, Kevin and Dr. Regina understood sexual crimes are not motivated by sexual preference or limited to gender. Based on their vast experiences of being the kind of people others naturally talk to, they agreed that sex crimes were, nine times out of ten, mostly driven by a grossly unregulated thought life which fed upon the destruction of self and others and was demonic in its origins. Kevin knew this fact better than most. But the tragedy of it all still elicited double pity, and produced breathy sighs reserved for the unbelievably incomprehensible. (4)

The theoretical construct of good being affected by evil complicates the narrative and the reading experience. *Troubled* aims to use the concept of being "a/effected by something" to its advantage. As such it employs affect theory to prompt from the reader a search for universals in the narrative. It is this elicited reader-response that will be the narratological tool by which *Troubled's* characters and the text's purposes will be lifted from the page and into the mind of the reader for a more personal and significant evaluation of the plot's conflict.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In accordance with reader-response theory, *Troubled* has been crafted with the idea that writing and reading are each a “creative process” that “invokes common experience” and at the same time values “no single fixed interpretation” (X.J. Kennedy et al. 124). Understanding that both writing and reading are creative actions, *Troubled* is careful to not adhere too closely to any single fixed interpretation. The plot leaves ample intellectual space for the reader to insert his or her value system. Although *Troubled* boldly operates within the paradigm of Christian precepts, its foundational lessons are based on the purpose of the text, which is to lovingly help those who struggle with pedophilic desires re-structure schemas that have bound them to thoughts and behaviors which coax them, seduce them, and possess them into perpetrating sexual acts toward children.<sup>4</sup>

It is commonly known throughout the neuro and psychological sciences that people who commit sexual offenses spend a lot of time fantasizing about and idealizing sexually offensive behavior (Salter; McGuire, Carlisle and Young; Burgess, Hartman, Ressler, Douglas, and McCormack). In fact, research states that their imaginations are indeed so active that they have a tendency to become engaged to the point of action because of the vividness and influence of their unregulated thoughts (Becker; Gee, Ward, Belofastov, and Beech). Being as such, as an author, I am deeply interested in *Troubled* being highly effective at the level of thought. Consequently, *Troubled's* narrative-based

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<sup>4</sup> Likewise, Neurocritical Embodied Narratology operates from this same intuitive/mind/bodily space, in essence, an honest experience felt and believed by the author is highly more likely to translate as intended to the reader than a contrived experience; thus, the concentric connection between author and reader is yet another reason ethnographical, psychological, and anthropological research was important to the making of *Troubled* and its purpose to educate the public at-large, and examine this social issue.

therapeutic aesthetic required ethical and psychological underpinnings that are equally dynamic in their ability to be both familiar, and compelling; thus, provided my reason for creating a Christian horror novel.

Allow me to provide a few facts and figures before discussing my rationale. According to a 2011 Pew Research Center of Religious & Public Life report, “A comprehensive demographic study of more than 200 countries finds that there are 2.18 billion Christians of all ages around the world, representing nearly a third of the estimated 2010 global population of 6.9 billion.” Statistically speaking, if *Troubled* is effective in its aims, it can speak the “love language” of those whose beliefs it conforms to,<sup>5</sup> specifically the one-in-four and one-in-six population that exists within Christianity. Equally important, is tapping into populations that have an established organizational model which has a proven track record of surviving depressions, recessions, and budget cuts while still being able to serve its most vulnerable community members. Outside of me being a Christian myself, these are very tangible reasons to practice audience awareness and operate within the tenets of the Christian faith. To contextualize these figures and logic, considering that budget cuts at the state and federal level have significantly reduced access to social services, purposing and packaging *Troubled* to be a therapeutic text that can function within the tenets of Christian faiths increases its opportunities to reach those who need it most.

In addition to that, the supernatural and spiritual elements of Christian faiths have long been integrated into one of the most effective and accessible ideologies and methods for dealing with spiritual and behavioral issues. The Twelve Step program, known for its support groups and free counseling, encourages those who suffer from compulsive sexual

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<sup>5</sup> A concept popularized by renowned Christian author Gary Chapman.

behavior to admit their lack of power over defeating unmanageable sexual strongholds, and it guides them through the process of allowing God to restore sanity and order to their lives (AA World Services).

*Troubled's* readers being in a yielding mental space that is open and ready for change, is an ideal situation because it is a fertile place to begin the emotional part of the healing process. Horror being selected as a fitting genre for *Troubled* is based on horror being formatted to provide a narrative arc that supports discovery, confirmation, and confrontation, which are all vital steps in changing behavior. Art-Horror theorist Noël Carroll states that, "...horror is an emotion...that horror narratives are designed to elicit..." (24). Fear is known as one of the greatest and most effective motivators. In terms of authoring a text that can help buttress efforts that discourage behaviors and thoughts that lead to wrong paths, there is no better genre than horror to strike a chord at the level of fear and feeling.

Carroll defines and distinguishes horror in terms of how the monster is perceived. Carroll states that, "in works of horror, the humans regard the monsters they meet as abnormal, as disturbances of the natural order" (16). Part of what makes *Troubled* a horror novel is its clear stance against, and unromanticized view of, pedophilia. In *Troubled*, pedophilia, the spirit of pedophilia is the monster. Pedophilia evokes in every character essential to communicating the mission of the book a feeling of "physical wrongness" (218). Carroll cites Stephen King to further define horror. King states, "in horror, the monster is shown or described; its physical wrongness causes a physical reaction" (Carroll 218). Physical wrongness does not appear in *Troubled* in the form of a warty, many-limbed mutant being; however, it does appear in the form of a monstrous touch that causes

a revolutive physical reaction. For example, when Mace molests six-year-old Baby Eddie the text states,

Mace giggles. Eddie relaxes. Mace laughs. Eddie laughs uncontrollably. As the worm wriggles from Mace's palm to Eddie's then back again, Eddie loses himself in the beauty and wonder of his childhood. The worm wriggles and wriggles as Mace inches closer and closer to Eddie. In a moment, Mace's face is intentionally just a turn of the neck away from Eddie's lips. And when the planned inevitable happens, Eddie's vision goes black, and water breaks from him. Fear, innocence, and youth pour downward onto the ground in long streams from his eyes and down his thighs. Life as sweet, precious Eddie knows it leaves his mind and body in one terrible scream. (72-73)

#### LITERATURE REVIEW

The research for *Troubled* is drawn from various disciplines that operate within the elements of character, plot, and artistic purpose. There are three investigative texts that have played a central role in informing the cultural, psychological, and medical aspects of *Troubled* in terms of race, behavioral patterns, and gender. The first text is *The Sanity of Survival: Reflections on Community Health and Wellness* a compilation of studies facilitated and compiled by Community Psychologist and Medical Doctor Dr. Carl C. Bell. Bell's community-based studies and research are the foundation which *Troubled's* purpose is being built upon. Bell's work emphasizes the need for more affordable and accessible mental and behavioral health treatment options (which *Troubled* will be) especially in communities which suffer greatly from high incarceration

rates, are at a socioeconomic disadvantage, and are largely without intervention methods that enhance self-esteem, improve problem-solving, and develop affective awareness (118).

The second text that plays an essential role in terms of character formation is the work of Anthropologist James B. Waldram, Ph.D. Waldram's, book titled *Hound Pound Narrative: Sexual Offender Habilitation and the Anthropology of Therapeutic Intervention*, is a collection of ethnographic investigations (facilitated by Waldram) that document the therapeutic experiences of men who are incarcerated for sex crimes and explores and evaluates their performance while they were enrolled in a narrative-based prison treatment program. Dr. J. Paul Fedoroff, medical doctor and Director of the Sexual Behaviors Clinic, describes *Hound Pound* as, "a magnificent description of 18 months living with a highly stigmatized segment of society" (714). For *Troubled*, Waldram's work provides keen insights on the sensibilities and motivations of persons who commit sex crimes.

The third text, written by Clinical Psychologist Dr. Anna C. Salter, is titled *Predators Pedophiles, Rapists, & Other Sex Offenders: Who They Are, How They Operate, and How We Can Protect Ourselves and Our Children*, provides research concerning the prevalence of sexual crimes. Salter's work has provided evidence for the urgent need we as a society have for prevention practices, programs, and products aimed at assisting people who are in need of sexual treatment for sexual ideations that involve children. Salter states, "We can significantly cut down on the problem of abuse by avoiding high-risk situations" (226). It is my hope that by reading *Troubled* and identifying with its central characters, readers will, especially those who are prone to



perpetrating deviant sexual acts, will be better able to identify their own patterns of behaviors which lead to criminal acts, and that they will gain from the narrative resources and tools that they can use to avoid high-risk situations.

In addition to these investigative texts, two notable novelists who subscribe to adult-child sexual relationships being disruptive to childhood are Amy M (AM) Homes and Elizabeth Scott. Homes's *The End of Alice* (1996) and Scott's *Living Dead Girl* (2008). Both are terrifying social protest novels explicit in their communication of ideas about personality types and schemas of child-sex enthusiasts; the burdensome psychological affects of child-adult sexual relations, and, for me, the equally important matter of communicating the role society plays in the perpetuation of children being sexually assaulted. The connection being built between *Troubled*, and Scott's, and Homes's novels is a mutual desire to engage readers in a rhetorical narrative about spectators and participants in the world the novel creates. Wolfreys et al., state, "Reader-response critics contend that literary works do not function as self-contained, autonomous objects, but rather as realities that become established by the readers who consume them (148-149). As authors, we have the ability to re-situate readers from the positions of the characters and also from the meta-experience of being outside the text. Readers may apply the skills and ways of thinking learned in the text-world to their everyday lives.

The underlying text that is essential and most important to *Troubled* is the Christian *Holy Bible*. The *Bible*'s admonitions, proverbs, and precepts as they pertain to salvation, grace, mercy, sin and redemption are perfectly suited to *Troubled*'s representation, expression, and intention of being a text that seeks to assist those who are in need of re-authoring their lives.

Psalm 139: 7-12:

Whither shall I go from thy spirit? Or whither shall I flee from thy presence?

If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there.

If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea;

Even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me.

If I say, Surely the darkness shall cover me; even the night shall be light about me.

Yea, the darkness hideth not from thee; but the night shineth as the day: the darkness and the light are both alike to thee.

James 5:16:

Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.

“You have to have obstacles or you become a very dull person. If you have no obstacles, oh phooey! You have no tale to tell, you’re just sailing through.”

—Mosie “Mama” Burks

*Troubled*

## 1.

The story was heart-wrenching. Kevin McCall had been working eighty-hour weeks for the last month, so he had only heard bits and pieces here and there about news reports that seemed to upset every person he encountered. The entire central Illinois region had been rocked by the case. It was so compelling that even Chicago newspapers picked it up. Kevin could not walk into any business, gas station, or restaurant in his typically rather sleepy town, Charleston, Illinois, without overhearing someone talking about the investigation.

Before now, Kevin had been too busy to pay attention to what else was going on in the world. However at this moment he was stuck in his dentist's office. Dr. Regina's waiting area which was more like a barber shop or beauty salon because of its laid back energy was especially noisy on this day. All around Kevin people were catching up on the details of the case.

At the receptionist desk, Sheila, the secretary, was talking to a pharmaceutical salesperson rather passionately about the young boy who had been molested in the nearby town of Effingham. With her large, round, coarse afro glistening with each turn of her head, she said to the young blonde, "Cathy, you know, I'm from there. Everyone is outraged. This tragedy done brought all those that were divided together, and honey, it has laid waste to the reasons that divided them. Black/White issues, male/female, Christian/Muslim, no one gives a damn about any of that right now."

Kevin, having traveled through Effingham, was intrigued by this report. Effingham was uncomfortable to him when he was there in 2010. It had been a sundown

town many decades before, but somehow nearly a half-century later the old feelings still lingered. So, Kevin knew the gravity of the woman's statement, and because he had seen in passing that the victim's family was Black this information really piqued his interest.

Across from Kevin, a woman with a T-shirt that read *Poetry is My Life* was talking with two other women who appeared to be leaning in closer to her with every word she spoke. She said to them, "When the Redding family cried out from their souls pleading for anyone to help them find who molested their son, if you possessed even the faintest ideas about love and compassion you could not help but shed a tear. The whole lot of them were wailing without abandon on national TV. Them Redding men all tall and strong and fit were majestic beasts broken, reduced to helpless weeping. The women—feminine and refined, sophisticated and cared for—tore at their dresses and dropped their expensive handbags in the dirt. Their agony was tangible and contagious. It proved too much for even the most seasoned journalists. From channel to channel, voices cracked, eyes dripped, noses sniffed."

By this time, everyone in the waiting area was talking about the Reddings. Beside Kevin, a ruddy, long beard, muddy boots, Latino man with a serious southern drawl was talking to a university-sweatshirt wearing fraternity looking guy. He said to him, "Black Joe Jenkins and that lumberjack white dude, Jeter Baker, they been fighting since I was a young'n. I even heard them say, 'we'll work together to strang up the lowlife that touched that child.'"

Just as the words "strang up" were forming an image in Kevin's mind, his name was called. Dr. Regina, although she was shaking Kevin's hand and welcoming him back

to the exam area, it was clear she was very much actively listening to all the buzz in her office.

2.

After a few niceties and check-up questions, Kevin could not help but ask his known to be conscientious and critical thinking doctor, “Why out of all the crimes that happen every day, to all the dear people they happen to, what’s so special about this case?”

Dr. Regina wheeled back on her stool. She looked at Kevin’s deep-brown complexion, his perfectly razored crew cut, his starched shirt, cuff links, tailored slacks and calfskin shoes. She asked him, “You know the child or his family?”

Kevin told her, no.

She continued, “Well, I do. I know you know the racial climate in Effingham because we’ve talked about it before. And I can tell you, all the hoopla is not because the little boy is Black. Certainly, there are reasons that cannot be unexplained—timing, the moon, the waves, who knows. But I do know this, the boy who was molested; he is the sweetest, kindest, most gentle boy I’ve ever seen. I’m a very practical person, very much about the here and now, the explainable. But that boy, I know in my soul, he’s an angel. And everyone who’s met him or been around him agrees.”

Kevin looked at Dr. Regina perplexedly. He never even thought this hardcore scientist would ever even think such things in her most private of thoughts, so to hear her say what she said aloud with the same conviction she uses when explaining why flossing and brushing daily is mandatory made him take especial notice.

“Seriously, Kevin,” she said, “we’ve all talked about it. For example, I’ve been out with the family at times, and the most racist, life-hating Whites seem to hate a little less in his presence. Same thing with the Blacks, even the most self-loathing, damaging Blacks, their energy becomes noticeably gentle when he is around. I know that boy’s blessedness first-hand.”

Kevin took in what she said. He looked at her natty gray hair and her skin which was the color of a Brazil nut’s shell, and knew her pain. Both being people of color who have suffered both colorism and racism, Kevin decided to change the subject, re-direct the hurt. “So what about the perp?”

Dr. Regina collected herself and said, “Oh, Kevin, that’s the latest development. It’s my understanding he was killed yesterday in Chicago, beaten to death. I saw the news on my feed this morning. I haven’t had an opportunity to read the entire story yet. But from what I could see, he was a young, Black boy, seventeen years old. A shame, already so disturbed. His name was Mace Johnson.”

The reality of that statement caused both of them to inhale deeply. Thinking as a clinician, Kevin was further disturbed by the young man’s overtly opportunistic predatory behavior. Both being mature and aware people, Kevin and Dr. Regina understood sexual crimes are not motivated by sexual preference or limited to gender. Based on their vast experiences of being the kind of people others naturally talk to, they agreed that sex crimes were, nine times out of ten, mostly driven by a grossly unregulated thought life which fed upon the destruction of self and others and was demonic in its origins. Kevin knew this fact better than most. But the tragedy of it all still elicited double pity, and produced breathy sighs reserved for the unbelievably incomprehensible.

Dr. Regina wheeled herself within reach of Kevin. She reclined his chair, and adjusted the overhead light before speaking again. She said, “Kevin, you know what was strange.... You know strange for someone who’d go so far as to do what he did being as young as he was: A witness reported him saying that he was sorry and that he didn’t want to be a pedophile.”

Kevin thought about what Dr. Regina said as she examined his mouth. He thought about the young man being Black, possibly poor. He thought about what he knew of affordable mental health care in Chicago and how it was diminishing, and how it had just about dried up altogether for those living near the poverty line. Being a therapist, he pondered the providers he would have trusted to actually care for a young, poor, black man. He could only think of one, who he knew would treat him with care and seriously understand the very certain danger he was in, Dr. Carl Bell. Bell understood the value of meditation, exercise, a constructive, disciplined thought life, and a lifestyle that promoted being of service to others in a way that benefitted them without tearing them down. The problem was even his clinics had been closed. Kevin placed his hand over his heart when he thought about the prospects for young, Black males who are mentally ill, but he nearly audibly whimpered when he thought about the most likely outcome for those who are also battling compulsive sexually deviant behavior. Kevin shook his head at the bleakness of the situation.

Dr. Regina took his gesture as a response to her statement and decided to continue; she said with sincere pity, “I can’t help but to think about all the help out here, especially for the youth. I can’t help but think that he didn’t have to be the way he was.” She paused for a moment to give what she said a second, not so idealistic thought, then

shifted gears. “Well, maybe there isn’t as much help as I think. Like I said, I haven’t had a chance to read the entire story, maybe knowing more about him and his life will make it all make sense.”

In that moment, Kevin decided that he would take some time away from work, pick up a paper or two, browse a few websites, to see what he could learn about this tragically flawed, spiritually troubled young man.

3.

Immediately after leaving Dr. Regina’s office, Kevin picked up some local and regional papers at a gas station. His favorite hangout, Eastern Illinois University with its fine arts and community events held much promise for an enjoyable Friday night. However, being compelled to learn more about Mace Johnson, Kevin continued past EIU’s attractions and journeyed home. At his house not far from the university’s backyard, Kevin thumbed through newspapers, visited websites, and listened to podcasts. He closed and opened one particular paper that included an especially clear image of the young man’s face several times. So striking were Mace Johnson’s features, Kevin decided he needed to zoom in. *My goodness*, Kevin thought to himself, *this young man looks exactly like me*. Hurriedly, he punched up the story on his HD, retina grade quality tablet. Right there in the clearest pixels money can buy, Kevin saw an exact copy of his very own eyes, nose and mouth. Kevin’s mind began counting, thinking back, remembering. It had been exactly eighteen years since he left Chicago. Kevin thought about it, 200 miles were between him and where he grew up, where he had his first kiss, fell for his first love, and now 200 miles marked the distance between where an exact copy of his eyes, nose, and mouth had lain dead in the street.



All of this was rightly troubling to Kevin. He paced his floors, made himself some tea, stared at his own image, put his tablet next to his face, looked in the big mirror he kept in the hall, turned the lights on, opened the curtains, and took another look with Mace's image magnified, right side his own living breathing face. The more he looked, the more they looked alike. His knees felt weak. He started sweating, had to sit down. *Lord, have mercy*, he thought. He had to get some rest. Very much unlike his daily routine, he took a nap at two in the afternoon. "Some sleep will help me give perspective," he told himself. After two dreamless nights, his heart was still racing. After five naps stretched out over the course of many hours, his house, his very own house all at once looked unfamiliar. After an entire weekend filled with comparisons and contrasts and correlations, Kevin finally gave in to doing some serious remembering that Sunday afternoon.

## 4.

Since the time he was a young airman, serving his country on an airbase in Lajes Field, Azores, every now and again he'd have a paternal sensation, a feeling that he was connected to something, someone in a fatherly way. On and off over the years, he'd catch himself thinking about being a parent, not longing to be a parent, but actually being one. Around the holidays and in the month of November, the thoughts and feelings would slip past reality, as he knew it and make themselves known. When visiting family for Christmas and Thanksgiving, they would complain about him talking loudly while sleeping. They'd tease him, "Kev, you sure you ain't got no kids? All that my son, my son talk in your sleep says otherwise." Although he heard similar observations from

different people at different times over the years, he never let on that it bothered him or that the possibility even existed.

How Kevin handled this sleep talking, strange feelings matter was no coincidence; since childhood, he had had been conditioned to not be the sort of person who would speak of anything he was unsure about. His silence about the intangible and anything he did not have first-hand knowledge of was a habit seared into his being by his mother and siblings. Their meanness imposed upon him an unnatural tendency to not think aloud, to avoid wondering, or casually discussing musings. As a child, if Kevin hinted at even the slightest bit of doubt or if the truth was not exactly what he reported it to be, they'd taunt and tease him cruelly. By the time he was seven, he had been conditioned to keep his thoughts to himself, which was against his observant and giving nature. Kevin had been relegated to only speaking when spoken to and nothing about his life, his personal life was ever important enough to share.

As a boy, Kevin demonstrated strictness over his thoughts and actions and craftiness in his social interactions which made him the love supreme of his fastidious grandmother's admiration. Kevin's grandmother, Hassie McCall, would say to Kevin's mom, who everybody referred to as Ms. Lucy, that, "This one, he's special. I see it all over him. Raise him up in the right way and blessings will abound." Ms. Lucy, although pleased to hear such words from her mother, couldn't help but be broken-hearted. Her mother had not said the same about her or her other children. And for that oversight, Ms. Lucy neglected Kevin. Ms. Lucy, whose once soft heart had grown ornery due to a lack of validation and affection in her own life, only had so much love to give and since her mama and daddy seemed so taken by her middle child, she figured that he "with all his

smartness” could get the love he needed from them. In return for her orneriness, Hassie heaped praise upon her grandbaby for his self-control and his unlike-his-mamanness in the form of lessons in arts, music, spirituality, and culture.

Lessons in culture came from unlikely sources. Hassie pulled every string and tapped the shoulder of every well-to-do person she came in contact with to enrich the life of her grandson. Hassie’s savviness and forward-thinking paid off too. Taking her gorgeous, bright-eyed Kevin to open civic discussions and scholarly debates put both of them into contact with the Black intelligentsia of Chicago. By the time Kevin had reached his early teens, he was spending hours upon hours at the DuSable Museum comparing and contrasting African and African-American cultures. At the DuSable the importance of being actively engaged and seeking answers through books and most importantly through experiences became central to his learning process.

Hassie, honoring her grandson’s maturity and curious mind, determined it would be good for Kevin to venture further from home. Although Hassie did not care much for her sisters’ lifestyles, she understood the value of their travels and ways of thinking. So every now and again, she’d petition his mother to allow Kevin to be sent on trips with her sisters as they traveled about the United States helping others in need. It was with his aunts, Barbara and Angie, that Kevin learned to appreciate different lifestyles, tolerance, and most importantly practice open-mindedness. Although Kevin’s immediate family were staunch Catholics, who had strict beliefs about holiness and the ways in which God communicates with his beloved, Barbara and Angie on their missions trips, helped all God’s children regardless of how different their beliefs and faith practices were. Whenever Kevin joined his aunts, the great-hearted women would welcome him with

open arms. They loved Kevin and would sing songs of adoration to him and tuck him in with moral tales each filled with both the mercy and mercilessness of God.

On one particular trip to the Pawnee reservation in Oklahoma, his aunts participated in a purification ceremony. That night they had a shared dream, neither ever told another soul about exactly what they saw, but they warned Hassie that something about the forces influencing Kevin disturbed them. Afterward, they took Kevin with them on a few more trips but declined taking him from home after he became thirteen. During their last visit alone with Kevin, they prayed over him fervently and asked Jesus to protect him for all the days of his life. They also pleaded with Kevin to always give himself time to think through his actions, and to only pair with those who would not chain him to hell in this life nor the one after. Before they left, one of his aunts took him to the side and told him something about the iniquity of the father being visited upon the children and that although some spiritual problems are generational, God's great love for us gives us the freedom to be judged individually for our sins (Deuteronomy 5:9; 24:16). When Kevin asked his aunt what exactly she meant, she sighed and said, "You will understand better than anyone can ever tell you in due time."

From that night forward, Kevin—panic-stricken by their behavior, deeply hurt and without recourse—did the only thing his thirteen-year-old mind could think to do, and that was to neglect himself. His mother and siblings did not value him, his aunts abandoned him, so he too began silencing and ignoring his inner voice and instincts. As a budding teenager, the ambiguity of their statement combined with the acidic attitude of his mother increased the potency of the hurt feelings he had about his absentee father which led to a rather severe form of arrested social development.

Though he excelled at all things academic and athletic, he had many personal hangups. By the time he was sixteen, he had internalized the characteristics of what the kids at school called “weird.” As he grew older, he did not have the tools to grow out of the harsh inner-criticism that he had developed as a result of being rejected by his mother, shunned by his aunts, and shamed by his peers. All of that negativity culminated into a deep distrust of his own thought process and a heavy reliance upon validation from others. And when he did not receive positive feedback from key persons in his life, he would fall into deep zombie-like depressions. The consistency of his grandmother’s love gave him just enough strength and hope to not kill himself, but not enough to live in the type of light needed to cultivate a healthy self-awareness. Kevin’s lack of awareness in key areas of his life limited his view of his power and created a myriad of mental blocks.

As he contemplated his childhood, he felt ever fortunate for the inheritance his grandmother left him, which was an arrangement for two years of Christian counseling sessions, and two books, *Make Your Mind an Ocean* and a *Bible*. Kevin’s counselor helped him identify and assess the affects his upbringing and humanity’s fallen nature had on his inability to see himself as someone who could change outcomes. The books each in their own way helped him to understand how to value life and how to think of himself as a spiritual being capable of producing life, and being a vessel for emotions in all their many variations.

Feeling valuable and powerful was not second nature for Kevin, over the years he had become capable of accessing it. And it was within that mental space while peering at Mace Johnson’s face that Kevin was pulled away from his typical thought patterns and into a kaleidoscope of possibilities. While looking into Mace’s eyes, Kevin gave himself

permission to think of himself as a being capable of making another being. For the first time in his life, Kevin brainstormed and clustered all the thoughts that had been categorized under miscellaneous and unthinkable. He allowed his mind to rest on, *Did I get Nessa pregnant? Do I have a son?* The thought had been inconceivable before, but now, while looking at Mace's image, anything was possible. Granted, he never once saw any signs of pregnancy; he and Nessa only had sex once, and they did continue to see each other for an additional two months after that, but obviously none of this meant for certain she could not have had his child. As Kevin continued to think through this, his resolve grew stronger. He knew he had to travel back to where he grew up. He knew he had to find answers.

The decision was made, he had to go back to where he came from.

5.

Kevin could not help but feel the excitement of the Chicago skyline as he entered the downtown area. It was just a few moments after sunrise, a perfect summer morning, the highway was comfortably populated, the wind was a just-right warm, and fellow drivers had their windows down and their radios up and were listening to jazz and talk radio. This was the Chicago least heard about—mature, with an almost spa like kind of peaceful. Despite all the bad news that all too often made its way to Central Illinois concerning the all-consuming metropolis, on this July morning Chicago was a busy calm, living up to its motto “the city that works.” In the downtown area, men and women in suits, delivery people, joggers, bicyclists, pampered dogs, musicians with instruments, and workers of every type were seizing the day.

Kevin smiled with expectancy as he pulled into the garage at Presidential Towers. He'd made arrangements with his good friend, Alberta, to lodge at a corporate suite while in the city. Kevin chose to stay downtown so that he could have some form of familiar respite, in case the sights, sounds, smells, memories, and revelations overwhelmed him. The suite was as close as he could get to feeling at home, feeling shielded. It was as close as he could get to the middle-class surroundings his hard work had afforded him, by chance something triggered the desperation and poverty he felt during childhood, which it often did when he thought on it too long. He did not want to have prematurely end his mission by not preparing for emotional overload.

After checking-in and having breakfast, he changed out of his daily business-casual attire into clothes and shoes he typically reserves for gardening. He packed a plastic grocery bag with two bottles of water, a notepad, and two pencils. In his pocket, he placed the neatly folded article that had the clearest picture of Mace Johnson's face. Twenty minutes later, he was on his way to secure a bus pass and transit map. The staff who checked him in did a double take. Kevin was pleased by their response. His transformation was effective. He was now ready to re-visit the past.

From the view of the Green Line train as it coasted and jolted on the rails of the elevated tracks, Kevin could clearly see a variety of markers that served as lines of delineation. The area west of downtown Chicago had ghettos within ghettos. He thought to himself, *Chicago certainly is a segregated city*. Somewhere between where the strain started and his destination the clientele started to change. Before, people of all colors who boarded and exited the train walked and talked and carried themselves with purpose. However, somewhere along the way, although the mix of colors did not change

the attitudes of the people and the overall mood became a strange mixture of hostile and oppressed.

In order to avoid becoming the embodiment of some passenger's random frustration, Kevin turned his body and his attention toward the wide, clear windows of the train. Looking down upon the landscape, he could see jalopies and luxury cars. He noticed that even those with wealth and decided to remain, they didn't really help because their properties were barricaded behind iron wrought gates, and bedecked with security cameras.

Depending on the property, its landscaping, and automobiles, Kevin imagined that the well-to-do chose to reside here because they were the baton-running descendants of the upwardly mobile who marched with King and heeded the good word of Fred Hampton. They were the holders of the dream who were longsuffering activists of the "proletariat struggle." They believed in "all power to all people" and worked interminably for the right to political education, the right to be civic power, and self-determination. They longed for liberation.

However, he also knew that amongst the King-Hamptonites were the opportunists. Their motivations were selfish. Their community endeavors appeared helpful, but were actually exploitative. This particular crowd, they talked the talk but their actions were self-serving. They cared nothing about the neighborhood or its people. Some of them were homegrown, some of them were implants, and others were well-off globetrotters who had meticulously calculated that the area would undergo full-scale gentrification in the near future and wanted to get in while the prices were still reasonable.



Yet, the cost for those rock bottom prices meant that the well-kept and expensive was walkway-distance from dilapidated building and houses and lots. Side-by-side they existed together, the extravagant and the much in need, the graffiti and the orchids, men who had never worked and men who had worked all their lives, and women who were leaders of industry and women whose children were being raised by the state. However, for all its contradictions, the west side of Chicago was still a desirable location because it had people who were holding on and striving every day to create parity and sincerely cared for the impoverished.

A twenty-minute train ride, positioned Kevin at the epicenter of his old neighborhood. He wasn't sure if it was his thirty-five-year-old eyes or if he had just gotten use to the insulated middle-class life he'd been living in Charleston, but the impoverished areas of Chicago reminded him of Useni Eugene Perkins's book *Home is a Dirty Street*. The unavoidable gang presence, the constant stream of squad cars, the boarded up houses, the overall trickledown cyclical lack of care, all of it was depressing in an enraging way. The whole west side of Chicago looked like filth to him: It was not only the trash strewn from private property to public space, the graffiti, the drained malt liquor bottles laying on their sides in the gutter, the emptied baggies decorated with skulls and cannabis leaves that populated the sparse grassy areas like so many dandelions; but it was also the food deserts, the flocks of homeless people, and the scores of abandoned buildings they stood in front of. It was overwhelming.

As he walked, Kevin could see that drug selling and prostitution was not to be stopped on account of a Monday morning. As Kevin walked, he looked around him and saw a mess of juxtaposed contrasts. Some folks were undeniably under the influence and

belligerently harassing children on their way to school. Others were walking along the street picking up trash and putting it into bins. Along the way, a young pimp stood off in the distance keeping a vicious eye on even younger prostitutes. And catty-corner to them, a well-groomed teen-aged black boy with his three sisters, stood at the bus stop practicing Swahili and looking cared for. Walking along the scum-encrusted sidewalks, Kevin was up close and personal with young men and women who had tracks on their arms, burnt lips, and blackened fingertips. While at intersections, he stood alongside young men and women with books under their arms discussing literature and talking about their plans for the future.

Moments later, he was arrested by an eerie feeling. It was as though he was passing through a field of energy, a portal of some kind. Desperate emotions coursed through his being, evil sensations surrounded him. So awful was the atmosphere, Kevin could not resist quickening his steps to that of a jog. Still, the aura persisted, becoming more and more intense. Just as Kevin felt frightened enough to break out into a full run, something in his peripheral vision caught his eye. A woman who was too old and a boy who was too young were looking way too comfortable with each other in the worst of ways. At once, after he scanned her appearance and took at her tawny skin, pockmarked face, and opaque grey eyes the energy around him dissipated. It left as quickly as it came. Kevin stopped, blinked, rubbed his forehead then his face. The feeling had certainly passed. He looked back to see the woman and the child, but they were gone too. It all happened so rapidly, he wondered if any of it happened at all.

As Kevin neared the corner, he waved at a group of men who looked to be from every continent on Earth. They were reminiscing about the first time they read Haki

Madhubuti's *Don't Cry, Scream* and discussing the importance of music that inspires excellence. After moving through all of that and experiencing all of the emotional shifts it causes, Kevin had to put down his sack for a moment. As he looked about, he was astounded by the chaos yet mesmerized by how everyone just kept on keeping on. He took a moment to look back. The woman and the boy were gone. The teen and his sisters had boarded the bus. And everyone else continued...doing.

Recalling everything he'd seen up to this point, including memories from childhood, Kevin thought about how the faces had changed but much of what had been going on when he left was still going on now. Despite all of the improvements and advancements and all the other things that are supposed to change the world, Babylons and Gomorrahs still existed. All of it together led him to think that his quest to discover the who and what of Mace Johnson, was also a journey toward a greater understanding of what the *Bible* means in Ephesians 6:12, where it states, *for we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness*. When Kevin thought about that passage something deep within him worked itself out from the inside and brought a sense of clarity and purpose to his thinking. He wasn't sure about all the details, for the feeling was ephemeral but its impact was lasting. After the reassurance, he felt sure that by day's end whatever was pushing him forward would pay off.

6.

A half-mile walk later, Kevin's targeted destination came into view. As he neared closer and closer to the street where he and Nessa grew up, memories began stationing themselves before him like exhibits in a museum. Walking down the block, still images

of days gone by came to life bringing with them thoughts, smells, music, tastes, shared words. Whenever he lingered too long on any particular thing, it was if he had walked onto a movie set after action had been called and all the players knew their parts.

Such happened after spotting a discarded lime green barrette, the plastic kind fashioned into a bow that snaps onto the plait of a girl's hair. His friend, Beverly Gainesworth, had such a barrette. She would wear packages of them all at once in many colors. Her mama would press her wooly-cottony hair into many silkened pigtailed that cascaded down her back and around her shoulders. Each one would be adorned with a different color barrette. He remembered she was especially fond of the many shades of the red ones, yellow ones, and blue ones. However his favorite was the lime green ones.

Kevin bent down and picked the barrette up out of the grass, like thunder a memory shot across his field of vision. Beverly's words shouted like wind into his ears: "Help me, Kevin!" In a rush, Kevin dropped the barrette, but it was too late. The memory was already reeled to play itself out.

It was a summer day, May 1988, Kevin saw Beverly running home, her barrettes a flurry of color and sound clacking against one another beating her in the face. A group of kids were close behind, chasing her with hate and laughter. "Say something else about how my daddy gone die," one of them shouted. Beverly, up against a fence now, cried, "I'm sorry. I, I, I'm just saying what I saw. I dreamt it." One of the kids grabbed her by the collar, "Take it back, heifer! Take it back! My uncle ain't gone die." And almost as if time stopped, she took her eyes off them and looked directly at Kevin. "Help me, Kevin!" She called out, "Help me!" Kevin dropped his book bag, picked up the biggest stick he could find, and ran from across the street. Kevin's long, strong, brown arms swung to and

fro with a ferocity that even Hank Aaron would be pleased with. At the sight of big, tall Kevin McCall rushing toward them, and the sound of that stick slicing the air to shreds, the kids scattered.

Over the years, Kevin saved Beverly several more times. The small group of people she was able to help appreciated her gift, but those she couldn't help hated her. No one understood that she could not summon a vision or will herself to have one. She did not practice any form of magic. She was just a girl gifted with sight. Her gift was just as much a mystery to her as it was to others. She also fell out of favor with people because her premonitions were nearly always ones of the disciplining sort which did not fare well with the impulsive crowd. After a few of her warnings unfolded into their tragic ends, she earned the name Bad News Beverly. That moniker and all that came with it led to her having a rather friend-less life.

Once, Beverly attempted to re-connect with a young man she and Kevin were acquainted with while in grammar school, she shared her dream about him and what evidently was secret behavior before establishing a rapport. What she said enraged him. One moment, she, the guy, and Kevin were peacefully talking about third grade, the next moment he had a gun aimed between her eyes. Kevin begged and pleaded on her behalf and just barely talked him out of shooting Beverly right in the middle of her sixth sense.

For this act of bravery, Kevin won Beverly's undying friendship. After the near-death incident, regardless of how much time had passed, she always brought up how he saved her life. Last time he saw her, in her early thirties, when she visited EIU to see her cousin graduate, she told everyone who would listen how he was her best friend and how he rescued her from being murdered. It didn't matter to Beverly that she had not seen or

talked to Kevin in nearly seventeen years or that it had been twenty years since the incident. Remembering Beverly's sweetness and childlike innocence, Kevin decided to keep the barrette. He held it for a moment before putting it into his bag just to be sure he wouldn't be plagued with a deluge of thunderous memories. This time, all was quiet.

## 7.

He continued onward, not really having a specific destination other than getting into the area to ask people questions and look around to see what he could hear about Mace Johnson. He knew better than to try and find Nessa. He had heard years ago that she was in such bad shape that half the time she did not even know her own name. And based on all accounts, everything he'd heard about Nessa having lost her mind was true. To that end, there was not one person of Mace's family he could contact.

His investigation made him wish he knew more about Beverly's whereabouts. Last he heard, she had gotten married and moved. A quick Google search retrieved no results, and if he did run into anyone who knew her, he felt it might do more harm than good to ask about her. Looking at his map of the Austin neighborhood and trying to recall where close childhood friends lived filled him with despair. The few friends he had that made it out were long gone from this place and those that he heard had remained were not the types he wanted to share such sensitive matter with. He imagined that in the wrong hand his questions about a dead boy could thwart his mission and put him in a dangerous situation. The reality of having not only to ask about this young man's life, but also having to answer the questions of others hit him hard. This, he had not quite anticipated.

The memories of the harshness many of the people of the community had displayed toward Beverly, made him worry about being treated cruelly. After a few deep breaths, he concluded he must push forward, but where? He did not want to go to the police station without having more information and he knew better than trying to get information from whatever school the young man attended. In his re-awakened despair, he closed his eyes and prayed for a miracle. Upon opening them, he saw the numbers 124 on a torn lottery ticket that had a wad of bubble gum on the top and a slick of mud on the bottom. *124*, he thought, *124*, he gasped as the numbers attached themselves to a memory. 5124 West Ohio was the building address of Beverly's extended family.

When Kevin arrived at 5124, the two-flat Greystone was nothing like he remembered. The window frames were worn. The lawn was unkempt. The curtains were mismatched, and the wood of the front porch was weathered. It was very much unlike the dignified, courteous, aware of the power of presentation tradition that Beverly's aunt and uncle practiced. They always kept a tidy lawn with flowers that complemented their shades and curtains. They were incredibly neat people who greatly appreciated their property and showed it by dutifully tending to its upkeep. But, this place, with its broken this and busted that made Kevin hesitate going to the door. Then, just before he thought himself out of the whole idea, he saw a charm that had been left in the yard. It was a silver G with small sparkling rhinestones bordering its edges. Kevin figured chances were a Gainesworth still lived there. So he collected himself and powered forward hoping to get some help from an old friend.

When Kevin knocked on the door, a young voice from inside told him to wait one minute. Kevin obliged. About five minutes later, he heard the sound of locks

disengaging, a door chain sliding and falling against the frame, and the creak of hinges. Peering into the small squares of the screen door, Kevin saw a young girl, no older than eighteen, a mass of hair, and a long dusty white cotton gown.

Stale smells wafting from the house assaulted his nostrils. The girl's long, sandy brown hair filled with knots and curls, moved stiffly as she unclasped the screen door and invited him inside. Kevin refused to move his feet before knowing who she was. "Is this the Gainesworth residence?" he asked trying but failing to hold back his disgust.

"Yes," she muttered.

"Are your parents home?" Kevin said with a grimace.

She explained to him that she did not have parents, she had a father, and that her mother was deceased.

"I'm sorry to hear that," Kevin said. "Please have your father come to the door. Thank you for your hospitality." And with that, Kevin stepped back several paces and stood in the sun.

The next thing he knew, the door slammed shut, it hit the frame with such force that two ears of corn which were perched on the porch near a St. Jude sculpture rolled down onto the grass. Kevin waited a few minutes then headed back toward the door, just as he raised his fist to knock, the girl opened the door.

When she emerged from the shadow of the foyer, she had on a pair of jeans, a white and blue striped T-shirt, yellow sneakers, and a blue barrette unthoughtfully placed in her hair. In her hand was an obituary, she handed it to Kevin without saying a word. Kevin took it and immediately saw the picture of his dear friend, Beverly. She had died



two years ago to the date. He read the document carefully and paused when he reached the part that stated she left behind a daughter, named Tira.

“Are you Beverly’s daughter?”

“Yes, I am. My mother told me you were coming.”

This time when Kevin stepped backward, he nearly fell off the porch. “Wait. What are you talking about?” he stammered.

“Just the other night, my mother told me a friend, her best friend would visit soon,” Tira said with a smile full of awe looking not at Kevin but at the miracle he was.

Kevin with bucked eyes and a mouth he had to intentionally close, stared at Tira. Oh, how she looked like her mother, but wilder. Her complexion, smooth and deep and dark, the color of raisins. Her hair, natty and wooly and long was parted down the middle and braided down to her shoulders. It was puffy and unruly. Looking at her was like looking at her mother, but her frumpy untamedness was unidentifiable. So disheveled and bedraggled was she that had it not been for her physical features, no one could have made him believe that Tira was the daughter of his finicky and dapper friend.

The contrasts of everything got the best of Kevin. He needed verification, something to ground him. At once a flurry of questions shot from his lips. “So you live here with your father? Where is he? I thought this was your maternal people’s property. I heard your mother married and moved away from here. What is going on? How old are you? What did your mother tell you about me?”

Tira processed all of his inquiries. She said, “Well, if you want all those questions answered, you’re going to need to have a seat.”

She watched as Kevin slowly backed against the post of the porch's staircase and slid his body down into a seated position onto the top step with his bag clutched tightly in his hands, all the while never taking his eyes off of her. His fear of her was visible: the unblinking eyes, the careful movements, his feet positioned just so in case he needed to run. As to not frighten him further, Tira placed her back against the railing facing him and sat down on the third step. There they sat, peering into each other's eyes, each bewildered out of their wits, yet trusting that the moment was fate.

“Well,” she said, “I’m sixteen years old. I live here with my father. This property belongs to my mother’s side of the family. You heard right, my mother did move and she did get married. She moved from the place she spent her childhood, her grandfather’s house on Douglas, about six block from here to Alabama. She met my dad there. This building here belonged to her great aunt, Mae Bell. Mae Bell left mama this property when I was seven. Against my father’s wishes, we moved back here. My father had a house and his own business in Alabama, but mama had to come back to Chicago. Why? I don’t know. She’d tell my daddy, ‘BarLee, I got to go back. I don’t know why I just feel it. It won’t let me rest. I got to go back.’ So, ‘cause my daddy adored my mother, he left all he owned and moved here. And now, that she’s gone, he still can’t leave. I don’t know why about that either. However, I’m starting to get the feeling that everything may have something to do with you being here.”

Her last statement sent Kevin into a tailspin. He began putting together all of the pieces of information he heard about Beverly since he’d moved to Charleston. He thought about the last time he saw Beverly. He recalled how she glowed and how pretty she was. He said, “Oh. She must have been pregnant with you when I saw her last, at her cousin’s

graduation, approximately seventeen years ago.” Kevin’s eyes brightened with tears, he placed his hands over his mouth. “Oh my goodness, Tira. After the graduation, when she was getting ready to leave, she placed my hand against her belly. She did it in this very roundabout way. I remember thinking, did she just put my hand on her stomach? But before I could ask anything, she was whisked away for a last round of pictures. I haven’t seen or heard from her since.”

Each paused, lost in the spin-off thoughts of their own and each other’s memories. Kevin continued, “When I got here this morning, I knew where I wasn’t going but I wasn’t quite sure where I was going. I just knew, like your mother, I had to come back here to the old neighborhood. I knew your great-grandfather’s place on Douglas was abandoned. A friend of mine told me that about a year ago. So I didn’t know how to reach your mom. I didn’t know she was dead. May she rest in peace. I had walked to the block where I grew up and was just looking around. My grandparents are deceased, and my mom and brothers and sisters moved from here long ago. I was so charged up to get here, but once I got over here and saw how there was nothing or no one for me to connect with, I started feeling lost. And like a miracle, I looked down and saw the numbers 124 on a lottery ticket. That was all I needed to re-boot my vague remembrance of the one time I walked here with your mother. Tira, trust me, it was so long ago and so tucked away into the recesses of my memory that had I not seen that ticket I would not have ever even remembered this place existed.”

Tira started to cry. Like rain a cascade of remembrances drenched her memory. All of the little miraculous coincidences she watched her mother experience over the years. Small things that made a big difference: found money, a remembered name, having

just the right words in the nick of time, an unusually helpful stranger. Tira sobbed as she recalled her mother's supernatural good fortune. The pain of the loss and treasure of it all made her place her hands over her face and weep bitterly. Kevin's eyes teared as he watched the mourning in her heart flush her skin red and make her sweat with grief.

When she removed her hands from her face she said, "I always resisted my mother's gift. As you may know my mother was Southern Baptist. Like my father, I'm Catholic. Although I knew her gift was real, I hated it. Everybody thinks I look like my mama, and I do, but if you knew my aunt Rene, you'd see I'm the spitting image of her. Rene loved my mother with all her heart, but mama spooked Rene, and so Rene always kept her distance from her. I think I inherited that, 'cause it really wasn't no reason for me to be as harsh as I was to my mother. I detested all that singing and dancing and talking to God, and speaking in tongues. I've always been very reserved, just like my aunt Rene, so Catholic traditions appealed to me. But, now, sitting with you today, I wish I had spent more time with mama. I wish I had gone to worship with her more, learned more about her. Kevin, my mother was a good person, the best I've ever known. I let my pride and prejudice keep me from her, and block her blessing from me."

Kevin looked intently at Tira and said, "Blocked her blessing from you?"

Tira, while looking deep into the not too distant past, said to Kevin, "About two years before mama died—none of us knew she was dying—I do remember two Christmases before her death, it was then that she started praying and fasting more than ever. Now, mama always prayed. She had a prayer life. And she always fasted. She always gave thanks to God. She'd fast and pray to bring her body and mind under dominion, she called it, so she could be a pure vessel. But those last couple of years, she

kicked it into overdrive. She even quit her job so she could serve the Lord full-time. We all thought she had gone crazy.

Well, anyway, the December before mama died, I remember the day, it was the last day of school, the start of winter break, I walked in the house. Mama didn't hear me come in. She was in her bedroom screaming at the top of her lungs, 'Help her, Holy Ghost. Stay with her, Lord. Be with her, Heavenly Father. In Jesus name. I pray that You be with her as You have been with me, Your faithful servant.' I ran over to mama, screaming 'Stop it, mama, please stop.' It was like she was in a trance. When she looked at me, and could finally focus, she said, 'Oh, my darling, my love, I was just praying for you.' When she said that, something about it made me so angry. I yelled at her, 'Stop praying for me, mama. I don't like it. Leave me alone!' After I said that, I saw her heart break. It was as if I could actually see it breaking. Then, for some reason mama reached for my head, she kept grabbing at it, and that's when I smelled that blessed oil she would make on her hands. At that point, I was enraged. I would never hurt my mother, but that day I pushed her off me. I remember seeing her fall pretty hard against her bedroom door. After that I just left."

Kevin exhaled the air, he'd been holding in his chest then said, "Tira, I'm sure your mother forgives you. You were afraid and you were angry. When your mom and I were young, I cannot tell you how many people were confused and frightened to the point of violence when it came to her. So, forgive yourself for that. I cannot believe, having known your mother, that she would hold that against you."

Tira with the countenance of defeat said, "Yeah, be that as it may. I still blocked my blessing. I don't have my mother's gift, not the way she had it. I can't help but

wonder if she was trying to leave it with me, Kevin. I do believe for all the trouble it caused her, she still wanted to pass it on, like leaving a legacy.”

Kevin, bewildered by Tira’s admission, said, “But you told me she told you I was coming.”

Tira slowly and carefully explained the nuances. She said, “Yeah, but that’s not how my mother’s gift worked. Like me, she had dreams, but my mother’s sight was complete when she was gifted a vision. It was as if she was like Moses, but God spoke to Mama in her dreams. Sleeping for her, when God had a message he wanted delivered, was like Moses going to Mount Sinai. It doesn’t happen that way for me. I’ll have a dream about my mother and learn things, and it only happens every once and a while, and it’s all very sketchy and disorganized. But, mama, she was truly the Lord’s earthly hands and feet.”

“Speaking of hands and feet,” Kevin said, “Tira, the reason I am here today is because I am in search of something I feel I may have missed in my life, and I’ve decided to put my hands and feet to work to get to the bottom of it.”

8.

By the time Kevin finished explaining the happenings of the past several days, starting at the dentist office going all the way up to his arrival at the Gainesworth porch, his thoughts about going inside the house had changed. He didn’t know why but each time he glanced inside the screen door from his place on the porch, the house, although quite dark, seemed to be lighter in both energy and luminance.

“So your mother lived here before she died, huh?” he said to Tira. Tira noticed Kevin’s eyes were firmly fixed on the foyer’s floor-ceiling mirrors which held the reflection of the living room.

“Yes, she lived and died here. Mama died while sleeping in daddy’s chair the one you can see in the mirror.” Kevin brought his attention back to Tira’s face. Tira continued, “She wasn’t sick or anything. Her body just gave up the ghost. Would you like to go inside, Kevin?” Tira asked.

“No, no,” Kevin replied, “I’ll wait until your father is home. I’m a grown man, Tira, and you are a child. You do not know me, and more importantly your father does not know me. I have no business being inside your house alone with you. I’ll wait for your dad to come home. If he invites me in, I’ll go. Thanks anyway.”

Tira was stunned silent by Kevin’s response. Since as far back as she could remember, her father impressed upon her the importance of being observant. The day she turned thirteen, her dad brought her the *Unmasking Sexual Con Games* book. And before that he always made sure to let anyone Tira was involved with personally, academically, religiously, or otherwise know that she had a father who cared and was watching over his daughter.

Tira would be deeply embarrassed as a pre-teen when her father would personally introduce himself to her peers and their parents. So well-associated her father was with her identity that everyone in the neighborhood, at school, and at church nicknamed her “BarLee’s girl.” It didn’t help that BarLee Brown looked like an African warrior, exceedingly tall, muscular. Even his teeth looked strong, wide and white like perfectly shaped squares of bleached whale bone. And anytime Tira would complain, Lee would

tell her, “You are mine to protect and grow up in the right way. Be patient. You’ll see the value later.”

Later came more quickly than Tira could imagine. She had heard rumors about sex, pregnancies, and abortions starting in eighth grade. By freshman year, Tira had seen several girls she was once friends with fall by the wayside. Girls she had gone to grammar school with could now be seen hanging out in alleys, drinking, smoking, getting pimped, and recruiting other girls into prostitution. Even Tira’s fifteen-year-old eyes could see that what many of them had in common was that their parents lacked awareness.

Tira was dumbfounded by what appeared to be a complete lack of awareness on the part of their parents. It was as if they didn’t understand that children had to be taught how to think and act, how to respect themselves, and needed protection. It was as if their parents did not, could not, grasp the concept at all nor how detrimental the outcome could be. And the outcome was absolutely devastating. Tira would see her classmates everywhere they were not supposed to be and right in the middle of where they should not be. Tira’s dad would be taking her to school and they’d be walking in the opposite direction, her dad would be taking her to church and they’d walk right by and not even stop to wonder, right by the church, her dad would be taking her to practice gymnastics and they were not even cognizant of what all the noise was about.

Tira’s sophomore year brought more of the same bad news. By the time she was fifteen, even more of her classmates had gone woefully astray, and it was at that same time she began to discern how certain types of people were capitalizing on her their poor judgment. Often, they were the same ones who had seduced and groomed them into



troublesome lifestyles. She noticed men of all kinds, and some women too, leering lasciviously at children her age and even younger. However, it was abundantly clear that the freshly bloomed troubled teens were the easiest targets. Despite the fact there were many men and women who were upright, the non-right ones stood out, made themselves known at the most opportune time.

When Tira became a junior it was clear to her that there were three kinds of adults in her community: those who ignored children altogether, those who fiercely protected the children, and those that preyed upon the children. Certainly, the most frightening of the three were the predators, whom she referred to as vultures. It was common knowledge that one of the most dangerous features of the vultures was their ability to be anyone—a derelict, a coach, a teacher, clergy, a man, a woman, another teen who had already been indoctrinated into the lifestyle. She had witnessed first-hand on many occasions, from her privileged place of protected daughter, too many lives destroyed by sexual immorality. However being both her father and her mother's child, she had a special, heightened sense and aversion to destructive sexual behavior. She had become a firm believer of the power and prevalence the spirit of perversion had on the reprobate mind. So Kevin's level of awareness and vigilance garnered him a respect reserved for those who resemble the air of honor her father authentically maintains.

Tira smiling says to Kevin, "You know, when I asked if you wanted to come inside I meant when my father comes home. The reason why I asked is because my dad will be here soon, and you seem so intrigued by whatever you're focused on in our house. He only works a half-day on Mondays. He'll be here any minute."

Kevin says, "Any minute, huh. That's great. Yeah, I'll stick around."

Kevin pulls a bottle of water out of his bag and offers Tira one. She accepts, and they continue sitting on the porch in the approaching-afternoon sun. “So, Tira” Kevin says between gulps, “Why are you home? Why aren’t you in school?”

Tira responds, “Funny enough, last week, Friday, the day after I had the dream about you, I got sick. Until you got here, I had not stepped one foot out of my room. Daddy has been nursing me back to health. The only reason he went to work today is because I started feeling better around 4. My daddy was raised on a farm, so he gets up early. Today, was the first day we had breakfast together since Thursday. Daddy makes me breakfast every morning. He’s a great father. I know why my mama chose him.”

Kevin takes another look around their yard. It is as unkempt as Tira’s hair. The state of her hair made a bit more sense to him now, she’s been sick. But Kevin felt there was a bit of a mismatch between the caring man she just described and the state of the lawn and from what he could see of the house. So puzzling it was altogether, Kevin decided to ask, “What kind of man is your father?”

Tira having watched Kevin’s eyes and the message they were conveying when he asked about her father, she tailored her answer to address his un-spoken query. She said rather nonchalantly, “He’s a busy man, a single parent now. This place used to be in tiptop shape when mama was alive. They would garden together, do all the housekeeping together, we literally had the best-looking place on the block. But since mama’s been gone, my dad just takes care of me. He doesn’t worry with all of the surface-level upkeep anymore. I think it being pretty here would remind him too much of my mom and would make him sad or something. I know I don’t like doing all the things mama would do with us, even though I enjoyed them, it still hurts too much.”

Kevin immediately felt bad for being so judgmental, and he felt terrible about being so self-centered that he did not even consider they were still grieving and were actively depressed. He was also a bit perturbed by Tira's insightfulness. He could tell by the way this unusually perceptive sixteen-year-old had been holding her own in her conversation with him that she could have easily given an answer far richer than what his small thoughts had summoned. And for this, Kevin took responsibility because he knew that had he only made the effort to convey that he cared about more than the condition of their yard she certainly would have risen to the intellectual occasion. To correct the matter and not damage their rapport Kevin stated, "Tira, you are such a sharp girl. I am impressed beyond words. It's obvious your mother and father have done well by you. What did they do differently than many others whose children fall by the wayside, as you say?"

Tira looked deeply into Kevin's eyes. The vibration of his voice changed and alerted her instincts when he asked about what other parents. She sensed that this was not a general question, but that it was something which was burdening him. She questioned herself. She thought, *he's a counselor he may just want her input to add to his cache of mental notes*. But the emotion in his eyes forced her to rethink that conclusion. This was a personal question and she knew it. It could be heard by the in-tune ear and felt by the non-calloused heart.

Tira cleared her throat before speaking. The underlying issue of the moment was starting to reveal itself. "Well," she said, "my parents love me. When my mother was on this earth she loved me, really loved me. She still does, her love like God's word is sown into my heart, the fibers of my being." She paused for a moment to give thanks for that

special gift before continuing. “But Kevin,” she said with thoughtful reflection, “I think the reason my spirituality, intuition, and wisdom are so advanced is because not only have my parents loved and cared for me, my father provided me and mama with a safe place to love, learn, and grow. All the stuff you hear about men doing, my daddy don’t stand for it from himself or anyone else. My father loves and claims me. A righteous man loves, protects, and claims me. That alone sets me apart. Mentally it frees me up to have higher thoughts and a greater understanding.”

Before Kevin could respond, Tira said, “Speaking of angels. Here comes daddy now.” When Kevin laid eyes on him, he had to catch his breath. The man seemed to be visibly absorbing the energy of the sun. He was just a beautiful brother. A man’s man. He possessed the look any young child would want of his or her father. He looked able, strong, capable of doing anything. And he was all the more striking when his eyes met his daughter’s. When Tira locked glances with he father, he made a show of picking up his pace. Kevin watched as they smiled from their souls and greeted one another with great love. It almost made him cry.

“Who do we have here?” BarLee said extending his right hand to Kevin. Kevin stood up in the presence of this man and shook his hand with reverence. Kevin’s first words were, “My name is Kevin McCall. Your wife was a dear friend of mine.” BarLee’s smiling lips tightened at the mention of Beverly. Tira instinctually grabbed hold of her father. It was almost as if he needed her to help him continuing standing. BarLee’s voice at first bellowing was now just above a whisper. “Thank you, brother,” BarLee said. “Any friend of my wife’s is a friend of mine. How can I help you today, Kevin?”

Kevin's lips hadn't moved before a gust of wind twirled around their beings. The plastic grocery sack Kevin brought with him collapsed onto itself, and through its thin plastic the green barrette could be seen. When BarLee caught sight of it, his lungs inflated with air and his eyebrows nearly touched his hairline. BarLee, without moving his eyes, said to his daughter, "Tira come in the house with me for a moment. Kevin we'll be right back with you." Kevin stood stunned. He was not sure what was happening but agreed that he'd stay put. Tira and BarLee walked into their house and closed the door behind them. Slow this down. I'm not sure I'm following the actions.

## 9.

After approximately ten minutes, only BarLee returned. Kevin could see Tira in the foyer's mirror. She appeared to be cleaning. BarLee stood forearm-length away from Kevin. When he spoke his breath smelled of fennel and mint. "Kevin," BarLee said, "brought me up to speed on the details of your discussion with her. But, I find it strange she cannot tell me exactly why you're here."

Kevin had been holding his reasoning for being at their residence all morning. Although he was completely engrossed in their conversation and was sincerely curious about each topic he and Tira touched upon, in the back of his mind he was just waiting for the right moment to bring up Mace Johnson. And still while standing in front of BarLee, the words would not form. They could not even make it to his throat. Somewhere between his mind, his will, and his fear they laid suspended, unformed, just thoughts without language. After an uncomfortable amount of time, Kevin willed himself to reach into his pocket and pull out the article. Without words he handed it to BarLee.

BarLee took one look at Mace Johnson's face and all was confirmed. He did not need to read the article. He did not need Kevin to tell him why he was at his doorstep. BarLee held the article by the tips of his fingers and with his other hand held himself up against the wall. Watching this giant of man go from looking like a warrior to that of someone who seemed to be descending into illness deeply frightened Kevin. "What's wrong?" Kevin stuttered. When Kevin looked into BarLee's eyes he saw a void that was not before. Kevin watched the article fall from BarLee's fingertips. He stared intently as BarLee swallowed several times before answering his question.

BarLee had a few false starts before words actually came out of his mouth. His jaw seemed near paralyzed and his shoulders were severely slumped. When he finally spoke it was as if something had aged him a thousand years. "Kevin," he said, "my wife married me because we are kindred spirits. The difference between us is my beautiful wife's gift worked in the light of God. The gift I have been given is the ability to see darkness. Although God has a hedge around me and is my protector, because my spiritual gift is so strenuous on me, the Lord gives me the choice of when I can use it," BarLee stops abruptly and looks Kevin in his eyes, "as long as I live and love holy and do not adulterate my being." Before continuing BarLee turns back to looking at the concrete between his feet. "Unlike my wife, who was an open vessel, I am closed and only open for predeterminations that are outside of my understanding."

Kevin shuffled his feet, unsure about what to say or how to say it. His fear at this point was inside his skin and rose up in the form of gooseflesh. If he could have run and put the whole thing behind him he would have, but he had the distinct sense that running would be futile. Whatever was to unfold the action of the process had already begun.

Suddenly, Kevin began feeling worsted. Blood rushed to his head and his ears felt as if they had been stuffed with cotton. His neck felt stiff and his limbs heavy. Kevin was just on the verge of passing out when BarLee's voice cut through the energy that was overpowering him.

BarLee said, "Kevin, one night while my wife was sleeping, about nine months before she died, she began talking. She was not the type who spoke in her sleep so I always paid attention whenever she said anything. That night, she said three times, 'The man with the green barrette. Help him.' The next morning, when I asked what she meant, she could not tell me anything. She had no recollection of any dreams and it did not make any sense to her. For some reason, out of all the things I've heard her say while sleeping that stayed with me, bothered me. I would pray for answers concerning the statement and nothing coherent would ever come of it.

The day that young man died, last Thursday, I heard people talking about him while I was walking to work. The closer I got to the intersection of Cicero and Lake the louder and more frantic the people became. I always walk pretty fast so I was only hearing bits and pieces of conversations, I had heard a boy had been killed. Then, when I got to the bus stop, I saw pools of blood on the ground. As I stood there staring at that blood, Kevin, clear as day I saw the reflection of a green barrette, just like the one in your bag. I blinked, looked twice, closed my eyes I all but got on the ground and touched where I saw it. It was not there.

That night I had a dream, about having to walk into a demon's lair to retrieve a book. Like the mission of Lot in Sodom I had to venture into the depths of hell. See, people tend to think that all heavenly blessings and knowledge can be achieved by

walking through the light; however, some must be fulfilled by walking through the darkness. I know you're here in search of what happened to that boy. I do not have any answers yet, all I know is you and I are destined to pass through the gates of hell to get the answers you are in search of. I will not burden you with all the details of how I know this, but that woman you saw today when you got off the train—.”

Before BarLee could complete the sentence, Kevin blurted out, “The one with the boy? The lady with the grey eyes?”

“Yes, her,” BarLee said. “Her name is Jaymel. She is possessed by the spirit of perversion. Within her is access to Mace Johnson's story. We'll have to go through her to find out about him.”

Kevin defiantly stood to his feet. “I will not,” he shouted, “participate in anything against Biblical law. I can't have any parts of anything like that.”

“Kevin,” BarLee replied, “our Lord is the Creator of all time and space. He sees into the hearts of men and can discern the just from the unjust. Everything we know and do not know, He created. I don't know why God gave me this gift. I do not know why God gave a donkey the ability to talk (Numbers 22:28). I do not know why He formed all that is in the earth, under the earth and in the firmament, or why He created sin, darkness, and devils and demons (Colossians 1:16). I have no idea why any of these things are in existence. All I know is every now and again He will send me on a mission to help someone attain revelation knowledge.”

Kevin feeling completely puzzled slackened his face. He was not prepared for that answer nor was he in any position to argue against it without referring to another Biblical story that did not have yet another Biblical story to counter its claim. Although Kevin



was well versed in Bible knowledge and considered himself an apologist for the faith, he never imagined having to defend what was typically widely accepted amongst believers. This conversation and situation was a paradigm shift so dramatic that it left him stammering and stuttering at the level of thought. In fact, Kevin wondered if he had not known Beverly and seen for himself her abilities, would he even buy into any of this thinking. But the problem of this crossroads was Kevin did know Beverly, and now in this moment he questioned if God made them friends because all of this was in His holy plan.

BarLee knew Kevin was deep in thought, as well he should be. From BarLee's experience, those who were selected for such revelations earned them through faith and works. Only people who God was walking-talking-real to allowed themselves the opportunity to exercise their faith in a way not bound by law. The God Who never changes from age to age, has never ceased to produce miracles or be omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent. From BarLee's perspective, God was as miraculous as He's ever been, it was us who brought Him down into boxes and began dictating what He could and could not do. BarLee knew, although Kevin had not accepted it yet, that the reason why Kevin was here is because Kevin was ready to grow and have a more spiritually dynamic relationship with God.

Silence ensued long enough for Kevin to make it to the last phase of his decision making process. He figured he had come this far, he may as well go further. Before making the commitment aloud, he questioned his reasoning, *Lord, is this what it means to walk through the valley of the shadow of death? Does it mean we stand beside the deceased?* These questions puzzled Kevin. He was torn within himself, just two hours

ago to even think such would have been sacrilege in his eyes. But what was he to do with the reality facing him? He could not reconcile turning away from finding out whether Mace Johnson was his son, and he could not live with the weight of always wondering what might have been if he turned his back on this opportunity. It was finalized. Kevin McCall would see this through. He placed his hand on BarLee's shoulder and said, "Brother, before we go can we please pray and sing a hymn together?" BarLee smiled at Kevin and said, "I would not have it any other way."

## 10.

After their lunch of kidney beans and rice, whole grain cornbread, and Tira's loose leaf iced tea, Kevin and BarLee prayed Psalm 23 with Tira and sang five hymns from the *African American Heritage Hymnal*. At exactly three o' clock, Kevin and BarLee left Tira at home after wrapping her in hugs and gratitude.

Kevin noticed that the neighborhood felt different walking alongside Kevin. Almost everyone who greeted him asked about his daughter. He smiled each time from ear-to-ear and said, "My princess is doing better than ever. Thanks for asking." It made Kevin proud to see a father so overjoyed by the very mention of his daughter's name, and to also see that people were responding to the connection that BarLee has fostered with Tira. The acknowledgement from the community was another layer of proof that the healthy father-child dyad is extraordinary in its ability to make a child not invisible. All around Kevin, earlier that day, as he walked from the train stop to his destination, it was painful to watch the invisible children. Those who were simply not seen, who were shrouded in neglect and purposelessness to the point of worthlessness. It was then that Mace Johnson fell on his mind with the force of a shooting pain into his skull. *What if*

*Mace Johnson was one of the invisibles?* Just the thought pained Kevin's heart so tangibly that he grabbed at his chest. BarLee having noticed the movement asked Kevin if he was alright. Kevin wanted to scream at the top of his lungs, I think Mace Johnson is my son! But he could not bring himself to do it. Looking into BarLee's eyes, knowing how remarkable of a father he is, Kevin felt small. He felt awful for being a grown man who did not even care to check back in with a woman he had slept with just in case something, someone had come of their union.

Kevin was embarrassed, to think that someone of his own flesh and blood was had been out fending for self in this big, dangerous world like a wild animal. And he was deeply scarred by not knowing whether Mace was his son or not, and if he was, he was certainly humiliated by his death. Kevin knew in his soul that if Mace was his, he would never reconcile not having acted on all the feelings he'd had over the years sooner.

Kevin realized that if he did not re-focus his attention elsewhere that the weight of his thoughts would bury not only his confidence but also his purpose. His childhood and the situation he was in at the very moment served as a reminder to him of the danger of what can happen when one allows disempowering thoughts to take hold. So in an instant he decided to get out of his own head and turn his attention outward.

The first thing he noticed was that while walking alongside BarLee, the neighborhood he had been so critical of before appeared different. Of course, all that he had observed earlier remained, but the good was certainly overpowering the bad now. For example, although there was much death and destruction all around him there was also abundant life and hope and people, all kinds of wonderful people.

And just as he had that thought, BarLee said to Kevin, “Hey, you see that guy standing next to the garbage cans over there?”

Kevin said, “The homeless guy? I mean, the homeless looking guy?”

BarLee said, “Yeah, him. His name is Mr. Jimmie Harris. Man, I’m telling you, you’ve never heard anyone sing Ave Maria the way he does, and in German too. Kevin, it’s beautiful. It brings me to tears every time.”

Kevin took another look at Mr. Harris, and was even more astonished that the guy with the inextricably tangled locs and clothing that was stained down to its inner fibers was capable of singing beautifully let alone in German. Without thinking about it twice, Kevin asked, “What happened to him? From the looks of it, I’m sure he could find work if he cleaned himself up. And if he’s bilingual, unless he’s severely mentally ill, he could certainly be making more of his life.”

Kevin, looking straight ahead, said to BarLee, “You’re right. But, Ol’ Jimmie doesn’t care about the things he used to. He was in the military years ago. He was an engineer. Things were going great for him. He had a beautiful fiancée. She was from Sierra Leone, smart, a gorgeous sister. About two months before they were to be married, she had a miscarriage. They were in Germany at the time. She took it pretty hard. One day she told him she wanted to go back home and be with her family. He thought it would help her cope. ‘Til this day, he never saw her again. It broke his heart. He said she was his everything and without her he didn’t want nothing.”

Kevin thought to himself: *Have I always been this judgmental? I could have easily surmised he was a veteran who fell on hard times. Why am I being so harsh?* Having been a professional problem solver for most of his adult life, he knew the best

thing to do was get out of his own head and hear the responses his thoughts retrieved, especially while in the company as someone as wise and conscientious as BarLee. Kevin then said to him, “You know to look at Mr. Harris, no one would ever even guess that’s his story. I immediately judged him as...well you know what I was thinking. I don’t remember being this way. Wait! I know I wasn’t this way. I was an underdog. I was him. People thought they knew all about me before knowing anything. Do you understand what I mean?”

BarLee with his voice slightly raised responded, “Yeah, I know. That’s what happens when we read and watch from too far a distance. You are what you consume. And if you’ve been just consuming what Baraka refers to “as the lying rag,” of course you’re judgmental and only have a very few stereotypical default thoughts and categories to turn to. That’s why we have to get our heads out of the newspapers and books, and stop relying on what someone who probably don’t give two mites about the real story has written. Man, some of these writers and scientists base all of their information off of a quick look at some numbers and a half-baked understanding of some statistics and other manners of skewed biased measures. You have to know and talk to people for yourself. To someone on the outside, Mr. Harris just another Black bum and everything that implies. They’d never even think to guess, the man may be as intelligent and talented as them and that his decision to be the way he is was based on how he’s made sense of the world.”

Everything BarLee said resonated with Kevin. He had not realized until this moment that everything he remembered about his childhood and this neighborhood was overwhelmingly negative. He thought to himself, *it’s possible I never investigated the*

*feelings and dreams I've had all these years about having a son because I despised coming back here. But why?* Just as Kevin thought "why?" the neighborhood began to change, it went from the poor working-class who had tattered screen doors and passable lawns to well-worn dirt and houses that had more plywood for windows than glass. BarLee, looking straight ahead, pointed his finger, to the west and said, "Brother, that's where we're going."

Kevin looked in the direction of BarLee's finger and saw a dingy, white, wood frame house with peeling paint sitting on a lot with nothing but dirt and trash and old cars on both sides of it. In just eight blocks you saw the difference between people who were still hanging in there and those who had given up. Kevin felt that all that was wrong and was ever wrong in the nearby vicinity originated from this creepy abandoned looking shack he was staring at.

Before they moved forward, BarLee warned Kevin that anything in his past, any secrets, any shames both hidden and forgotten would be used against him in his search for the truth.

At once, Kevin felt exposed and unsure. He asked BarLee, "What do you know about me?" BarLee assured him he knew nothing, only what he had shared. BarLee told him, "I'm a sort of guide. I can lead you here based on the knowledge the Holy Spirit gives me, but unless you say something about yourself, I won't know it. However, based on what typically happens, every demon in hell is going to try to stop you from grabbing hold of the blessing God has for you and that is done by throwing every iniquity, every immoral act, every transgression in your face."

Kevin paused for a moment. He stopped walking. He even stopped breathing momentarily. He was deathly afraid of uncovering his past. All the unanswered questions he had about himself, whole years he could not remember, things that people had said he'd done that he could not recall. The thought of finding about all of it now made him shiver. But the feeling that he may possibly be a father pulled him forward and made him put one foot in front of the other. Although Kevin was ashamed of BarLee finding out why he needed to know about Mace Johnson, he figured that if Mace was his son he deserved any torment God or anyone else could give him. Kevin prayed within his own heart that if Mace was his son that God would accept this act as repentance for not having been there for him. A tear escaped Kevin's eye when he thought about Mace and how he died, how tortured his life must have been, or at least he hoped it had been considering what he'd done. Then a feeling came down around Kevin. It was one of concern and acceptance. His heart filled with love for the young man. The sort of fatherly love he hoped someone shared with him during his short life.

Suddenly, BarLee's words broke into Kevin's mental space with the power of swift kick. It was then that Kevin realized he and BarLee were now standing directly in front of 5116 West Hadar.

BarLee, said quietly yet sternly to Kevin, "You must be brave and stand against the sin and reproachable acts of your life. When you step foot inside that house, Kevin, you're going to figure out real fast why God warns us against sin and an immoral thought life."

## 11.

As Kevin slowly walked closer to the house, he noticed that BarLee stayed behind. “Aren’t you coming?” he asked.

BarLee explained to Kevin that the spot where he was standing was as close as he was allowed. BarLee reminded Kevin of Deuteronomy 18: 10-11, which states, “There shall not be found among you any one that maketh his son or his daughter to pass through the fire, or that useth divination, or an observer of times, or an enchanter, or a witch. Or a charmer, or a consulter with familiar spirits, or a wizard, or a necromancer.”

In an instant Kevin became incensed. “Why did you bring me here, BarLee?” he yelled.

As calmly as he could, BarLee helped Kevin understand that the nature of the sin Mace Johnson allowed in his life was the reason why he had to come to this place. “God will protect you, Kevin,” BarLee reassured him. “But you must go alone. This is your journey. I will wait here for you. I will be praying for you while Jesus stands in the gap.”

Kevin felt the blood drain from his face. His shoulders sloped downward. Fear excreted from his pores in the form of sweat. He envisioned what his feelings looked like and straight away recalled how BarLee’s appearance changed after he had handed him the article. He felt himself growing exhausted, weak.

BarLee, shouted to him, “Stand firm. The Lord is with you.”

Kevin placed his hand on his back pocket and felt for the paper he knew was there. He pictured Mace’s face and resolved within himself to go on.

The street facing entrance of the home had a four-by-four covering it, so Kevin walked along the side of the house in search of another entrance. The house was



unusually long, and all along the drip edge of the roof, in the soffit, and on the fascia was black mold. The once white paint, now nearly a light greenish grayish ecru color was in flakes both large and small all along the perimeter of the house. Four-by-fours and other pieces of wood were nailed diagonally across many of its windows. Some of the smaller windows were broken out, and the wind created wild whistling sounds through them. At the rear of the house, he found a makeshift door. A large piece of plywood partially covered the passageway. Kevin could hear people inside. They were cussing and loud and making all manners of crude noises. He could smell alcohol and urine and hear the flicker of lighters. He shuddered at the idea of going inside.

From the direction of the alley, Kevin could hear someone approaching. A rundown garage blocked his view. However, from the sounds of it, a woman was drawing near. She was speaking loudly, crudely. She sounded like the kind of person who would be inside a place like this. When she came into view, Kevin was surprised by how young she was. She looked to be about sixteen. She was a pretty girl, but she talked and walked too old for her age. She had the wide gait and showy posturing of the women who worked the track. Her shorts were too short and too tight for a girl her age. It pained him to look at her. The little top she had on could barely contain her young body that already had tattoos and piercings and scars. It was clear what type of life she was accustomed to and it came through in the roughness of her voice the hard exterior of her appearance.

“Man, what you need?” she asked not looking at him, just seeing a man, another man.

Kevin quickly stepped to the side out of her way as she sashayed toward him never looking away from the entrance. Her skin was the color of caramelized onions, taut

and smooth. Her hair was the color of russet potatoes. Her eyes—gray. She was the younger version of the woman he'd seen with the young boy earlier in the day. Alarmed by how much she looked like the woman, Kevin responded stuttering, "Ya, your mother."

That's when she stopped, and whatever it was that was jingling in her purse made one last clanging sound. "What do you want with my mother?" She said, "Humph! If you really knew, you way too old for her!"

"Uhh, yes," Kevin replied, "Uhm, I have some questions for her." That's when she looked Kevin in his eyes, looked over his entire face, looked down at his feet and back up to his hair. She sighed with pent compassion, exhaled a puff of air then said, "You're Mace's dad."

Kevin's heart sank. His stomach swelled. All the blood in his body rushed to his head. The edges of his ears burned. He couldn't catch his breath.

"Are you alright?" She asked.

Through tears, Kevin wheezed out, "What happened to my son?" When Kevin asked that question he saw something visibly come over the young woman. In that moment, she was herself but not herself. She stared at him. Kevin shouted, "Greater is He that is in [me]" (1 John 4:4).

The girl's knees buckled after Kevin spoke. It took all the force of the habits that fight for her being to make her turn on her heel and push the plywood that covered the door. She opened it just enough for her body to shimmy inside. Kevin stood astonished. It was as if something turned her away from him and like a zombie she followed.

After her body disappeared into the darkness of the house, Kevin panicked. He could hear her speaking with people inside and them greeting her. “Hey, Cakey,” various people said.

Anxious and desperate, Kevin started yelling her name. “Cakey, come back here I need to talk to you!”

The sound of people scrambling followed. Moments later, he heard a woman’s voice.

“Who is that out there yelling your damn name, girl? Get him the hell on ‘way from here.”

Cakey responded, “That’s Mace’s daddy, Mama.”

“Mace’s daddy?!”

They sounded as if they were directly over Kevin’s head. Then Kevin heard another voice, a male voice.

“Yeah, Jaymel, I peeked out there and that man is the spitting image of that boy. For real! Same everything.”

That’s when Kevin heard the Jaymel voice say, “Charlie, get him the fuck on away from here. I ain’t got a goddamn thing to say to nobody ‘bout no damn Mace.”

Her words infuriated Kevin. With his bare hands he took the plywood with rusty nails pointing every which way out of it and threw it to the opposite side of the yard. Another half piece of wood was nailed across the entry way so that all who entered had to duck down before completely getting inside, Kevin kicked through that with the strength of a mule.

People ran out like roaches.

“Jaymel! Jaymel!” Kevin yelled. “I want to know what happened to my son!”  
Where are you? Come down here and talk to me now!”

Kevin walked further inside the house. It was dark and dirty and dusty. In certain areas light beamed through broken windows and cracks in the wall. He could see at his feet, all kinds of cans with burn marks, condoms, syringes, pipes, pieces of foil, blackened and bent spoons, and trash in various stages of disintegration. In several of the corners were mattresses. They were covered in blood and urine stains. Obscenities written in lipstick, markers, pencil, ink and crayon covered the walls. The idea of Mace being in a place like this with these types of people filled him with anguish.

“Where are you?” Kevin yelled.

Toward the front of the house Kevin heard a noise, when he looked over he could see a man coming down some stairs. He had his hands up, “Listen, man, I don’t want no trouble. I just want to get out of here.”

Kevin looked at the man. His body had been desecrated by drug use. He had a large abscess on his arm, and his breath smelled of dead fish. Kevin assured the young man that he did not want any trouble either, he just wanted to know what happened to his son. The young man replied eagerly in a hushed tone as he passed Kevin, “Jaymel knew your son. She upstairs.” Then he scurried out the door.

Kevin could hear Jaymel yelling at Cakey on the upper level, when he heard a loud slap, he ran for the stairs. As he hurriedly climbed them, he heard more slaps and curses. On the top of the floor and to the rear of the house he saw light pouring into a room and a Cakey holding her face crying.

Kevin rushed into the room and yelled directly into the face of Jaymel Rhodes, “Tell me what you know! Tell me!”

Jaymel laughed at him viciously. Her callousness filled him with rage and terror. Again, he exploded, demanding information about Mace. Again, the same reaction from Jaymel. The darkness that manifested from her being caused him to buckle and feel nauseous. Kevin stepped back to look at her. As she laughed, right away, in that moment the contortions of her face revealed different features. He noticed she appeared to be in her early forties but could look either older than her age or younger than her age. It was an eerie sort of disconcerting strange this ability to morph and recast one’s self. He lunged toward her, grabbed her by the shoulders to make her and all within her still, to bring this transmuting body of hers under control. When he took hold of her, however, he changed too.

It was immediate, the moment his fingers sank into the flesh of her shoulders his mind was transported back through time. He could see her as a child being raped by a man whose face she could not see. Her little legs with dainty socks folded down neatly at her ankles were opened wide on top of a washing machine as the bad man moved in and out of her. The sadness, the hurt, the confusion she experienced in that moment felt like hot dope coursing through Kevin’s veins taking dominion of all it came in contact with. Saliva flooded his mouth. Foam bubbled at the corners of his lips. He wanted to, but could not let go of her. Jaymel wrapped her arms around him, and with the strength of three men pulled him tightly to her. In a voice unlike anything he’s ever heard, so dreadful and intimidating was its graveled roughness that it caused him to urinate; she said, “You want to see! Now see!”

In a flash, he was her. Kevin could feel the ominous energy of the darkened room she had laid in, years ago, when she was in her early teens. The sounds of many men's voices filled the atmosphere. The smell of alcohol permeated her being. One by one they climbed atop her, forcing themselves inside, biting her breasts, pushing her deeper and deeper into an unknown mattress. Kevin was seized by darkness and lived the blackout Jaymel suffered brought on by the force of the men and the alcohol they filled her with.

Kevin wept. His mind was exhausted and his body had been ravaged. He pleaded for her to let him go. He tried but fail to squirm out of her grip. The voice bellowed, "Not yet. You still want to live." The words echoed in Kevin's ears and made his pulse quicken. The beating of his own heart could be heard loudly through his chest. Kevin's fear provided him with a bit of adrenalin, but it was no match for Jaymel's arms. His resistance only made her squeeze tighter. Tighter. And tighter still. Abruptly, he was immersed in a memory he recognized.

Kevin could see himself, a small, black-skinned boy. His hair cropped low, his little striped shirt tight against his frame. The sun shining through red monkey bars over his head as he played in the lot of his elementary school, thirty-five years ago. It was a weekend morning and because his mother rarely paid much attention to him, and was especially busy with helping his brothers and sisters, he was able to slip away to his nearby favorite fun area. Being seven years old with the playground all to himself not long after sunrise on a Saturday morning held its own excitement and promise.

Not long after Kevin had arrived, coming from the direction of the sand pit, he saw a rather tall figure quickly approaching. Before he could do anything, a hand was over his mouth and he was off his feet. Kevin kicked the body that was holding him, and

screamed into the gasoline smelling hands that muffled his cries and pinched his nose. Before letting him go, the person's other hand fondled and squeezed between his legs. As quickly as it happened, it ended. He was in the air one minute and pushed to the ground the next. Kevin's knees and shoulders ached for weeks afterward. The suppression of the memory lasted until this very moment.

At this point, Kevin was whimpering helplessly, pleading with Jaymel to stop and let him go. His petitions were mere whispers, breathless and inaudible. His neck was slack, his head bobbed against his shoulder.

Cakey having watched in horror as Kevin had become a visibly weakened, powerless, version of himself in a matter of minutes frightened her. She knew her mother had a strange sort of power, colorism was a major problem in their community. Although there were prettier, and far nicer women of the same hue as she and her mother and otherwise, it was the combination of Cakey and Jaymel's gray eyes and their silky light brown hair that seemed to mesmerize the people, especially the pimps and the drug pushers. Although Cakey had no real way of knowing, she figured her mother, was once probably a decent person; long before, all of the rapes and the drugs. Sometimes, Cakey would look at her mom and she could still see the little girl inside. That little girl was always hurt, but she was also innocent and though shy, very sweet. Cakey will never forget the first time she came face-to-face with the worst part of her mother. It was not long after Cakey's father stopped coming around. One day, he just up and disappeared. Jaymel waited and waited and asked and asked and dragged Cakey along as she went looking through other folks' windows, knocking on doors. One time she stood in the middle of the street yelling her Cakey's father's name until the cops came and stopped

her. About two months after the last time either one of them saw him, the men started showing up in droves and the funny smelling smoke and the lighters and the pipes and the white misshapen little pieces of stuff they would put in the pipes that sizzled and cracked became residents in their home. After all of that moved in everything of any value moved out, including whatever good was left in her mother's spirit.

As Jaymel continued squeezing Kevin, he would occasionally cry out, "Please, Uncle, Timmy, don't make me do it," Cakey remembered asking her mother to not make her dance naked for the men. Cakey was only eleven when her mother told her, "Honey, just imagine you're at the beach. You wear the pretty yellow bikini I bought you at the beach. It's just two little pieces of cloth that cover you. We all can see straight through it. Just come on in here, baby, and take that off for us. It'll be just like we was at the beach. I'll even do it with you, okay." Very few things made Cakey cry, even after all she had seen and been through. But this memory, this one brought bitter tears that burned every time. Cakey hated the men as they closed in on her with their hot breath and their hot hands, but what hurt her the most was the way her mother looked at her with wildly excited eyes and a wide smile. Cakey never forgot those eyes and how they appeared more opaque than usual and how they pulled the energy from her, and tugged at her very soul.

Cakey looked at her mother in this moment and saw that same wild look as she squeezed and squeezed Kevin. Cakey looked at Kevin and saw the way she felt while her mother looked at her naked body, while the men touched her. She prayed to God, Lord don't let this happen."



It wasn't a moment later that Cakey heard the voice of a classmate. She could not identify the voice by name, but she remembered it from school. "Cakey, Cakey," it called from the back yard.

Cakey composed herself and walked over to the glassless window frame. "Tira, is that you?" she asked.

"Yeah girl, it's me."

"What are you doing here?"

Tira said, "Is there a brown-skinned man up there who came looking for his son?"

"Yeah. But—,"

Tira did not wait to listen to what else she had to say. She did just as she had been instructed in her dream. She walked through the dark house calling on the name of the Lord, praying the twenty-third psalm. In the hall right off the room where Kevin and Jaymel and Cakey were she saw the demons of hell crowded around. Their perverse spirits committing awful sins against children, women, and men. The smell of their beings and the noises they made advanced upon her and assaulted her being. Tira prayed louder and kept pushing forward. Her stomach turned and her eyes watered. Tira screamed, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him. Blessed be the name of the Lord." The demonic spirits jumped at Tira, and attempted to distract her with salacious sexual acts, but they were no match for the Godly upbringing and inspired word her earthly father had imparted to her. She knew better than to be seduced by sex and its trappings. *Praise the Lord*, Tira yelled triumphantly.

Tira passed through the hall and entered the room, with her spiritual eyes she could see: In Jaymel's arms Kevin had fallen from atop the rock of his faith and laid

languishing on the threshing floor. Tira placed her hands on Jaymel. Jaymel just laughed. Tira prayed as Jaymel cackled. Tira, looked over at Cakey and said to her, “Are you a believer?” Cakey cried like she never has before and professed her faith. Tira and Cakey joined hands and prayed for the Lord to give them supernatural power. After their prayer, Tira told Cakey to bless the room with the oil she had in her bag, making the sign of the cross on every surface to keep praying and to not be afraid. Then Tira approached Kevin from behind. Jaymel continued squeezing him. Jaymel yelled obscenities into Tira’s face. Tira very calmly said to Jaymel, “get ye behind me, Satan.”

Tira, with oil on her hands, wrapped her fingers around Kevin’s wrists and braced herself behind him. Kevin sandwiched between Tira and Jaymel grimaced from the pressure. He did not know what was happening but he felt the warmth of Tira’s skin against his bare arms. Tira began praying fervently. The more she prayed, the more cognizant Kevin became. The memories of abuse he had forgotten, the memories of abuse Jaymel experienced that he had been exposed to, began to fade and lessen in intensity. All the darkness that had infiltrated his mind and that had been released into his spirit began being overcome by a marvelous light. It was small and dim at first then it began to sparkle and shine, colors twinkled and glowed and cascaded upon its rays.

Just an hour earlier, while sleeping in her father’s chair, Tira had seen the same light. Tira dreamt of her mother on many occasions, but never before had her mother touched her. Just as Beverly had wanted to when alive, she made the sign of the cross upon Tira’s forehead and passed on to her only child the gift of sight that the Lord had given her. Tira awakened from her dream and immediately had a vision. She saw Kevin in a room fighting for his life and the ability to know his son, she saw Cakey too, in the

same room with Kevin but rendered helpless by fear and doubt. She said to herself, *Lord, I will go*. Instantly, she was given all that she needed to do the work she was called to do.

With Tira's hands on him, even Cakey could see that strength was returning to Kevin. As he became stronger, the muscles in Jaymel's arms which were once tight and defined and unmoving began shaking. Cakey began praying harder and louder and rejoicing in God's power.

"Bless him, Lord," Cakey yelled, "bless him!"

Tira whispered into Kevin's ear the vision she been given. As she spoke, Kevin behind closed eyes could see colors flash, images came to him in sparks.

Tira said to him, "You had a son."

Kevin with a voice that was being revived every moment said, "Yes, Mace Johnson is my son." Kevin started to weep again when he said, "I did not know it."

Tira responded, "His mother never told a soul. But he was yours, before his appearance had been distorted by the thoughts and life he was living—he had your exact face and body. The rest of him was a mixture of the most broken parts of you and mother—his insecurities, his lack of awareness, his anger, his self-loathing, his severe loneliness."

Kevin feeling stronger said, "Please tell me what happened to my son."

Tira explained to Kevin that they would have to go through Jaymel. She was the one who had passed on the most powerful spirit of perversion to Mace and she was the one they would have to defeat to get access to Mace's story. Kevin immediately said, "I will do what I must. Lord, I believe."

Jaymel continued cussing and threatening them both while still squeezing Kevin with all her might. Tira gave the instructions and as a chorus Tira, Kevin and Cakey began saying the “Power of Christ compels us!” Over and over again they said it until Jaymel’s arms fell to her side.

Tira screamed, “Cakey, get behind your mother hold her up. Kevin, place your hand over Jaymel’s heart now!” Cakey and Kevin did as instructed. Tira said to Kevin, “Keep your mind focused on the fact that God is the author and finisher of our faith; He knit us together in our mothers’ wombs. The Scripture says, ‘Thou compassed my path and my lying down, and art acquainted with all my ways.’ Make your petition to God, Kevin.”

Kevin leaned forward and pressed his hand into Jaymel’s chest and screamed, “Lord, please give me the lessons of my son’s life, and forgive him, Father, and forgive me.” Kevin moved to the point of weeping, his confession poured out of him with all the force it took to break the stronghold fear had on his subconscious. He spoke the secrets of his heart.

Kevin said, “Since I left here all those years ago, something never stopped stirring inside of me. I would have dreams, talk in my sleep, and have to quiet the voices in my head. I knew in my heart I had a son. I just did not want to believe it. I was afraid. All the times I had been molested, all the terrible thoughts and feelings it left me with, all the fear, all the demons it had released into my life. I was afraid that whatever was in the people who had touched me, had gotten inside me, and I did not want to unleash that on my child, so I stayed away. And now he’s dead.”

The pain of Kevin's life permeated all that was living. The mice that had been scurrying around the room fell on their sides. The cats mewled in grief. A dog passing by outside howled long and hard. Tira and Cakey though sobbing loudly continued to stand. Kevin began to beg and plead for God to intervene, to provide answers, to bring peace.

Kevin calmed into a state of pure tranquility. Tira sensed his readiness. "Kevin, listen to me," she said, "keep your eyes closed. Ask God to give you access to your son."

Kevin's with his whole being restored, breathed in deeply, prayed silently and brought all of his energy into a fine point. He listened and watched closely for a miracle. Not two minutes passed before he heard something. "Tira," Kevin cried, "I see three children."

Kevin looked into the great beyond, and concentrated with all of his might. He said, "I see two people. They are way far off in the distance." A few more moments passed before Kevin continued. He said, "One of the boys is a small child. He looks much like I did as a boy. The other, oh Dear God, is my son." Kevin paused again. His eyes squinted stiffly while still closed. With great sadness in his voice, he said, "Torment and illness and pain is all around Mace. But, the other boy, I sense he is Eddie." The little boy waved. "Yes, he is the little boy my son...molested. He lives. It's obvious he will follow the ways of the Lord. There is great love in his heart." What is confirmed next made Kevin choke. Kevin said, "He prayed, that dear boy prayed, for my son, even after what he'd done. Thank you."

Although Kevin was joyful about Eddie, he still hurt sorely for his own son. He asked again, "God, please tell me about my son. What happened to him? How did he spend his final days?"

Without warning, a feeling of urgency overtook Kevin. The image of Eddie dissipated and only Mace was left standing. Jaymel's body begins to quake under Kevin's hand. She began laughing loudly, and screamed, "I did to him what his mother's uncle did to me!" Kevin nearly dropped his hand at this revelation. "What happened to my son?" He screamed.

Suddenly, Mace started running in Kevin's direction. Kevin yelled, "He is running toward me, Tira!" Tira tells Kevin to stand firm and to not be afraid. Kevin yelled, "He's getting closer! His energy is too much. He is getting too close! I can't take it," Kevin screamed.

Tira cried, "Do not be afraid! The Lord has placed a hedge is around you. Do not cower, let him run forth!"

Kevin hollered, pressed Jaymel's chest harder, and roared, "Blessed be the name of God forever and ever, wisdom and might are His!" Kevin pressed harder and harder and harder still. Mace ran faster and faster. Kevin bawled and screamed when his hand pressed through into the the spiritcape—in that place, it was great and it was mighty—it pushed through the hedge and his son's whole being ran directly into the center of it. His son's energy covered his hand and fractured into electric rays of saturated yellows and pinks, whites and blues. In the colors were the voices of all the people who his son had affected during the last days of his life. Jaymel's legs folded underneath her. Her entire body sprawled itself out on the floor.

Tira grabbed Kevin's shoulders and turned him around to face her. They held hands and entered into the spirit realm.

Tira asked, "Kevin, can you see what I see?"

Kevin answered, "If what you see is a road."

"Yes, Kevin. I see a road."

"Who is that coming toward us?" Tira asked.

Kevin said, "That is the angel. The angel the Lord sent to help me cross over."

Tira smiled. The angel takes Kevin's hand, the hand that pushed through the hedge and draws in all the energy and knowledge it absorbed, he lets it go, then lays his hands on both Tira and Kevin. From heaven, Kevin's prayers are answered. Pages and pages of thoughts and details of lives fell from heaven—they covered the road and shifted to and fro around their ankles. The sky cleared and quieted. One by one, the pages were gathered, then all were bound, into a neat and orderly book. The angel placed the text into Kevin's hand, then with a great wind ascended into the invisible.

Kevin and Tira sang praises to heaven, thanking God for all he had done. With their hands clutched around the book, they entered back into the earthly realm.

Had Cakey not personally experienced the miracle that had occurred before her eyes, she would have not been able to fathom the possibility of the omniscient knowledge that sparkled from the pages of the book that Kevin held in his hands.

"What is that?" Cakey asked.

Kevin with joy in his heart said, "It is a story about the final days of my son's life." Cakey grasped the *Bible* she held in her own hands and said, "Praise God." Then, she immediately turned to Tira, and said, "You have to go. My mama went to get some goons and they'll be back any minute now."

Tira looked at Cakey and extended her hand to her. She said, "If you're done with this life. Come with us. My daddy and I will help you."

Cakey cried, "My God, the Lord is blessing everybody today. Tira, I cannot stay here anymore. I don't want to be swallowed up by what has taken over my mother."

As the three walked through the house to its exit, they could hear the beams and the floorboards groaning.

At the street-side entrance of the house, BarLee was still standing. He smiled big and bright when he saw his daughter's face. "How? What? How'd you get here?"

Tira with an excitement she could not contain said, "Daddy, I fell asleep not too long after you and Kevin left. I had a dream, Daddy. Mama touched me. I received a vision and came here to help Kevin." Kevin marveled at BarLee, "I cannot believe you're still here." BarLee said to Kevin, "You were only in there an hour."

Neither Kevin, Tira, nor Cakey could believe that, but after checking their cell phones, it was true.

On the walk home, Kevin and Tira and Cakey talked over one another. Their excitement was jubilant and out of control. BarLee could tell that Cakey would never be the same, and explained to her that as long as she walked in the light, she would always have a home with them, and she could consider him her earthly father.

When BarLee said that to Cakey, Kevin stopped in his tracks. His smile and enthusiasm withered. He pulled BarLee aside and told him, "Mace Johnson is my son. He's the reason I am here. I was too ashamed to tell you. You, you're an exemplary father and man, and me, I didn't even listen to my own heart and come see about my son. I am so humiliated by my actions, especially when looking at you and seeing what I could have been."



BarLee said to Kevin, “Brother, look at it this way, at least you had the decency to be ashamed of your actions. Kevin, but this right here, what you’ve just done. You did that because of the great love you have in your heart for your boy. It’s not like he’s alive. It’s not like you have anything to gain. You’re here, you went through all that because you love him. Have no fear, God will make it right.”

Kevin, although he knew he had been forgiven by God, was still very much in fear of being rejected by BarLee, this man he had only known for a few hours, who felt like a father, a close brother, even a minister to him. BarLee’s kindness and understanding lifted Kevin up. His words made him feel better about himself, and made him more clearly see the purpose of the struggle they had all just endured.

When they all got back to BarLee’s and Tira’s house, three hours of daylight were left. Kevin asked, when they entered the yard, “Do you all mind if I share my son’s story with you?” Tira, BarLee, and Cakey looked at one another, then at Kevin, unplanned and in unison they each said, “Please do.” Without delay, they prepared for the reading. Tira poured tea, Kevin went to the corner store for popcorn, Cakey swept the front porch and cleaned the yard, and BarLee brought from within the house the most comfortable chairs he could find. Twenty-five minutes later they were all seated in the yard.

## 12.

Kevin began reading. He said:

West of I-57, there’s Carbondale. It is a small city, which is both southern and northern. Ethnicities from all over the world gather there drawn by its down home hospitality, its small-town convenience, and the expansive, untouched green land. The convenience stores have fresh fruit, newly picked from Carbondale’s trees. The people

still farm, raise horses, cows, chickens, and goats. They grow corn, shell peas, and pick okra. The houses still have space between them. Green, lush grass is everywhere. Wild flowers bob, cats sit on windowsills, and dogs watch birds synchronize their wings and fly. People smile when they drive by. They wave to each other in the morning. And ask, “How was your day?” when they come home in the evening. Nobody’s a stranger in Carbondale. If you live here, you’re family, made one by way of the spirit that inhabits the land and embodies the people.

## §

When the sun rises up high, clear and proud on easy July mornings, it hits the Redding’s house first. It invites itself right in, shines through the kitchen, beams across the living room, and meets its match on Eddie Redding’s angelic face.

“G’mornin’ baby,” Zakiya Redding, Eddie’s mama, says. “How’s my sugar? Is he feeling as sweet as he looks?”

Eddie smiles a snaggle-toothed grin at his mama and says, “Yes, ma’am! Can I go play?”

Zakiya Redding looks at her six-year-old, her first and only baby, and her womb stirs. *He’s so precious*—son of the only man she’s ever loved (besides her daddy, of course). She goes and stretches her palm over the smoothness of his face, feels the wool of his hair, kisses him on each eyelid, and holds him tight. She tells him, “Of course, my precious. After you get cleaned up and have breakfast. Mama made you some biscuits, sweet milk, and that oatmeal you like.”

Baby Eddie kisses and hugs his mama, does that dance that only six-year-olds know how to do, and rushes to the bathroom—little blue shorts, little blue shirt, pitter

patter, pitter patter, gurgle, gurgle, gurgle.

§

“Stop eating those biscuits so fast, son.”

Eddie’s mind is already outside, outside on their three acres of land, playing in the grass, swinging from the trees, and skipping down to the patch of jonquils that are in the center of the field. He finishes his breakfast quickly, cleans his plate and bowl. Then he takes off running down the hill for that patch. Looking after him, you see nothing but a trail of red dust, and hear everything that is the sweetness of honey child giggles playing patty-cake in the pleasant atmosphere he always leaves behind.

Zakiya hollers, “Be sure to get back here boy, before your daddy get home, and make sure there ain’t any worms in your pockets and no flowers in that hair of yours.”

Eddie giggles and giggles, not paying any mind to his mama’s warnings. How can he? His chums are waiting. He has given just about every flower a name, and any worm that slithers across his path has a friend for life. Eddie, a baby with stars in his big brown eyes, big brown eyes that are open windows to a soul full of sweet, cottony dreams.

“That’s one sweet, beautiful little boy you got there, Zakiya,” everyone always says.

The problem with sweetness is—everything and everybody wants some. Who doesn’t like a cool sweet lick of ice cream, a ripe cherry, or spicy tea with a touch of honey? And even sweeter than that is a beautiful little boy with stars for eyes and cotton candy for a soul.

Eddie loves to play in the extra-green grass that sits south of IL-13W. He sits there, and waves at every passing truck and zip-zipping little car making the jonquils

sway back and forth. He just sits there and plays while all his neighbor-mamas, as he calls them, blow him kisses and his neighbor-daddies give him a honk.

## §

Further down the road, Mace Johnson steps off a Greyhound bus. His eyes blink out the Carbondale sun. The earth tightens beneath his heaviness, and groans at his closed soul. Big, tall, strong, and broad, his muscles ache, his legs are stiff, and his arms need moving.

*Honk, honk.* “Over here, Nephew!” His aunt yells while getting out of her white, pristine Malibu with the license plate that reads: MZPRISC. “C’mon over here. I done made you some smothered chicken and iced tea. Let’s go get it,” she says while placing a fallen hair back into position.

Mace smiles at the thought of his mother’s sister’s smothered chicken—her gravy just-the-right-brown and perfectly seasoned. The chicken spicy and sweet with a taste of pure maple syrup, and all of it poured generously over a bed rice. “Emm, emm, here I come, Auntie!” When he gets to her, he throws down his bag and picks her up.

“Put me down, ‘fore you wrinkle my clothes,” she says laughing loudly and rubbing his big bald head. “Boy, you sho’ll is getting grown—and handsome too. Look at my big sister’s boy!”

Mace lifts her up and down a few times before he puts her on the ground. “Auntie Victoria, you looking good too, and if I recall correctly you don’ losta few pounds, aintcha?” He teases.

Victoria Jefferson gives her nephew a hush, and pokes one of his muscles. “Boy, you been working out!”

Mace laughs and mistakenly coughs in her face. “Oooh, Auntie, I’m sorry. Listen, before you even get started, I picked up some cough medicine before I got on the bus,” he says while picking up his bag.

Victoria shoots him an arched eyebrow and a twisted pair of lips then says, “Yeah. OK, just make sure you take some more when we get in the house, ‘cause that sounds awful.” After a few more hugs, Victoria says, “Okay, let’s go.”

Mace and Victoria get in the car. Her automobile is jasmine-scented. The seats and carpet have not one crumb. The dashboard shines. Even the windows are clean. Mace says to his aunt, “What? You clean this car every time you get in it or something.”

Victoria laughs and says, “Just about.” She stops laughing and sighs before continuing. “Mace, me and your mom grew up in dust and disorder. Our house and everything and everyone in it was so dysfunctional. I can’t stand messiness and grime, it reminds me too much of my childhood.” Mace watches the trees pass through his reflection as they serenely move toward her quaint and tidy forest-green house that sits ever so cutely in a woodsy alcove that looks like God made it just for her.

Victoria asks, “So, how’s it being seventeen?”

Mace gives his aunt a corrective look, and says, “Auntie, look at me. My muscles are so defined, my striations so deep, I look more twenty-one than seventeen,” he says, kissing his biceps.

“Boy, puhleeze,” Victoria says. “Now answer my question.”

“It’s cool,” Mace replies, unexcited.

“You are still keeping busy, aren’t you?” Victoria asks, concerned. “You know idle hands are the devil’s workshop.”

Mace quickly answers. “No, Auntie, everything’s going well. I’m still in Jazz band, football, ROTC, and the drama club. I’m good. Trust me.”

“How’s your mother, how’s Nessa?” Victoria asks.

“Mama’s fine. She’s taking her meds so she’s okay. She talks about you all the time, ‘My baby sister this, my baby sister that.’ She just doesn’t talk on the phone anymore, that’s why you haven’t heard from her. The new medicine they’ve got her on keeps her calm, but she’s still ridiculously paranoid.”

Victoria’s sister’s illness has never been easy for her to talk about. She changes the subject. “So, Nephew, what made you decide to finally come spend a summer with me? I’m happy you’re here. You know that. But...is everything alright?”

Mace gives a big manly laugh, so deep it makes Victoria look at him twice.

“Auntie, you know you’re my favorite. I just decided to come spend the summer with you, you know spend some time with my favorite aunt.”

§

After a moment of quiet, Victoria starts honking the horn looking out the window and waving excitedly.

“Auntie, who you honking and waving at now, the trees?”

“Nah, boy. You don’t see my little neighbor over there sitting in the grass? That’s my lil’ Eddie.”

Victoria yells out the window, “Hey, baby muffin! Hey, Eddie!”

“Oh, I see him now. He is a little one. Hmm. And he’s cute too,” Mace says.

The comment swirls in Victoria’s mind. It alerts something distant, and unimaginable within her.

Mace realizes his mistake and blurts, “Yeah, Auntie, I’ve been working with children in Chicago. You know teaching the grammar-school kids football and stuff.”

His response righted and dismissed his comment altogether, made it rational, so Victoria got right back to having fun with her nephew without another thought about it.

## §

***Moon. Sun. Moon. Sun.***

This full-of-shine morning, Baby Eddie runs down the hill with a belly full of biscuits and his mama calling after him.

“Yes, mama, I know. I will not put worms in my pocket,” he yells running down the hill out of his mama’s sight.

“Watch’m Jingles and LuLu,” Zakiya says as she lets her husband’s two lazy yet territorial hounds out of their pen. They look at her with their big tired eyes, then take off with just enough speed to get there *next* Sunday morning.

Yards away, Mace kisses his sleeping aunt and tells her he is going outside to enjoy the sun and take a look at her land.

“So you’re finally taking off without me, huh?” Victoria asks. “Well, up the road is the Reddings. Feel free to walk up there and introduce yourself. And pay no mind to them ol’ hounds. They just barkers.”

Mace walks onto the porch and stretches his long, thick limbs. His muscles, sinewy and full, tight and gorgeous, flex in the sun. His brown skin—marvelous. He jumps off the porch and walks for a while. The grass brushes against him. He strolls along admiring the quiet massiveness of the land, his gigantic feet cause the grasshoppers and crickets to scatter. Mace stops, looks around. He hears something. He squints his

eyes, scans the landscape. In the distance, he sees the faintest glimmer of a shining low-cropped afro. He peers intently and draws connections. His mind works. *The neighbor*, he thinks.

Mace quickens his pace. Eddie is standing where the grass is tallest. Behind Eddie the trees are dense, the ground is dark from their canopy. The Redding's house sits far in the distance, and his aunt's house is equally far on the opposite side. After a few minutes, Mace reaches Baby Eddie's range of vision.

Eddie sees Mace walking toward him and welcomes his presence. With two fat worms in his little open hands, he says, "Sir, this one's Clemmie, and this one is Ella. Would you like to hold one of 'em?"

Mace looks down into Eddie's eyes and is silenced by an overwhelming warmth. He wants to answer Eddie. He wants to say yes but he can't speak. Mace feels his emotions, they are balmy and rippling and feathering within him. Feelings flutter around his mouth and flush his cheeks. Again, he tries to speak but fails after looking into Eddie's eyes. Mace fully surrenders to a dreamlike, heady feeling. His hands clench. An intoxicating warmth gathers in his palms. It whirls. The heat uncurls his right hand.

Eddie puts the long, skinny worm into the center of Mace's palm. "Sir, OK, since you can't choose, you can hold Clemmie," Eddie says.

Mace lets the worm rest in his hand. The wriggling chill provides just enough frost to unhinge the heat and pressure that shut his jaws. He tells Eddie, "OK, tell ya what, I'll hold her for you, if you tell me your name."

Zakiya Redding's sweet little boy tells Mace his name, his nickname, phone number, and address without pausing to take a breath.



“Well, you certainly are a nice little boy,” Mace says stroking Eddie’s glistening brown hair with one hand, and gingerly holding Clemmie with the other.

Eddie feels comforted under his touch. Mace’s large hand feels strong like his daddy’s. Eddie misses his dad. Walter isn’t home nowhere near as much as he used to be. His job as a regional truck driver has made their once dependable daily daddy-son dates sporadic. Eddie thinks back to the days he used to spend with him. The nights he laid cradled in his arms. The smell of his father’s shirts, the sound of his dad’s voice saying, “I love you.” Just the thought of Walter’s voice makes Eddie close his eyes. He savors the memory. Without thinking he snuggles against Mace.

Eddie’s head resting against Mace’s leg causes Mace’s breath to catch in his chest. Feelings tear open inside him. Passionate feelings surge through his entire body. Mace remembers the last time he even came close to feeling this way. It was when a young mother, who had more groceries than arms and hands, asked if he would watch her daughter as she got the rest of her items on the bus. Mace said, “Sure,” while looking at the small, timid girl who looked to about three, and the empty seats all around them. When the mother sat her child beside Mace and walked up the aisle and off the bus to collect her things from the bust stop bench, Mace acted as if he was dusting something off his pants and placed his hand on the little girl’s thigh. When he looked down into the shock and fear that was in her eyes, a nefarious joy detonated whatever decency was left in him. He quickly told her, “do not make a sound.” And rubbed her until tears began forming in her eyes. As soon as the mom got back on the bus, Mace rushed past her and jumped off. The last thing he heard before running down the alley was the bus driver’s voice shouting, “Hey, get back here!” From that time to the present moment, Mace has

rubbed, squeezed, and fondled any child unlucky enough to be alone with him.

Returning his thoughts to Eddie, Mace begins massaging Baby Eddie's neck and stroking his cheek.

The crickets all chirp at once, screaming with their legs.

Mace's overly-warm, near sweaty palm makes Eddie uncomfortable. All at once it dawns on Eddie, nothing about the tall, hairless, unusually affectionate man reminds him of his daddy. A mournful, cold feeling ices through his abdomen, and great, heavy blocks of terror fill his arms and legs. Eddie wants to scream but dread blocks his airway. He is paralyzed. He wants to grab Clemmie and run, but he can't. His eyes, wide and wet, stare at Mace.

Mace sees the change in Eddie's mood and behavior, and the intense dread in his eyes. Mace bends down on one knee, puts his face in front of Eddie's, and asks, "What's wrong?"

Eddie can't speak.

Mace says, "Baby Eddie, don't be afraid. I'm your friend. C'mon, let's just keep playing. Everything is alright." Mace feigns interest in Clemmie. He pretends to talk to the worm and pretends the worm is talking back to him. "Okay, you hold Clemmie and let me listen," Mace says.

Baby Eddie agrees.

Mace giggles. Eddie relaxes. Mace laughs. Eddie laughs uncontrollably. As the worm wriggles from Mace's palm to Eddie's then back again, Eddie loses himself in the beauty and wonder of his childhood. The worm wriggles and wriggles as Mace inches closer and closer to Eddie. In a moment, Mace's face is intentionally just a turn of the

neck away from Eddie's lips. And when the planned inevitable happens, Eddie's vision goes black, and water breaks from him. Fear, innocence, and youth pour downward onto the ground in long streams from his eyes and down his thighs. Life as sweet, precious Eddie knows it leaves his mind and body in one terrible scream. A scream that climbs up the bark, jumps from leaf to leaf, rides the air, and squeezes itself beneath the cracked window of the Redding's kitchen.

Startled, having lost his sense of control, Mace reacts impulsively. He reflexively, mistakenly, hits Eddie on the head. Baby Eddie falls backward hard. The crickets scream. Mace gazes at him lying quietly in the grass, not moving. The vile impulses come back. Mace's eyes see nothing but what he finds desirable. He falls forward, feverishly kisses Eddie's mouth, and fondles his small body wildly.

The crickets screeeam hard with their legs. The dogs howl. Mace can hear their presence coming—beating down faster and faster, closer and closer. He roughly handles Eddie one last time before disappearing into the thick of the woods.

§

The hounds lick Eddie's still face. The crickets' legs cool with inactivity.

“Baby! Eddie!” Zakiya yells. Her legs running, hard and fast, toward the cling-a-ling of the dogs' metal ID tags. “Eddie!” Zakiya prays and runs, prays and runs. Lulu barks. “Eddie!” Zakiya can see the tops of the dogs' behinds, their tails waving stiffly in the air. “Eddie! Oh, dear God.” She slides part of the way on her knees to her baby. She touches his face, looks at the mark on his head, puts her ear on his chest to check if his heart is beating. She rubs his arm vigorously. He doesn't move. She looks at him to be sure she sees all his injuries before picking him up. She stalls suddenly. His shorts are

wet. The elastic of his little blue shorts is twisted. The center seam is pulled to the left. The band of the elastic is dirty on the inside. There are small welts in his tender skin. She smells urine. She sees his little socks and shoes are drenched. There are tears on his face. She looks around her, looks back down at her child, looks around again, remembers the way she came in and tries to see if any other tracks exist. She sees nothing but notices that the very place she is sitting is flat. The grass is lying on its side. She takes off her apron, and wraps it around her child quickly and carefully. Zakiya holds Baby Eddie close to her and rushes home.

## §

Two cars come up the road in a cloud of dust. The women hurry toward the Redding's door, and the men help them inside.

The medics have already restored Eddie's consciousness and bandaged his wound.

"Eddie," his maternal grandmother, Ruby, says.

Her face is blurry, her voice is not clear. "Hi," Eddie says.

"Eddie, Grandma is here, baby," his paternal grandmother, Iris whispers. "And the Lord is here too, precious."

"Yes, Ma'am," Eddie replies.

"Eddie, I'm here too, son," his maternal grandfather, Gordon says. "Can you see me?"

"Yes, sir."

"Son, you alright?" Gordon asks.

"Yes, sir."

“Your head isn’t hurting you too bad, is it?”

“No...not...well, emm hmm, a little.”

“That’s okay, son,” his voice faltering. “We’re gonna get you all fixed up, okay. We’re going down to the hospital where you came to see me. Remember that?”

“Yes, sir.”

Walter’s father leans into the crowd around Eddie. “I’m here too, Eddie. Your daddy’s daddy is here, boy. I love you, son.”

Eddie smiles, then squints from the pain. “I love you too, Papa Henry.”

Zakiya settles the logistics with Eddie’s grandparents. She tells them Eddie’s physician has been paged and is on his way to the hospital. She tells them what she saw, and breaks down twice in the telling. Zakiya asks Eddie’s grandparents to take him to the hospital. She says, “I need y’all to take Eddie so I can help the police, if need be. More than that, I just can’t imagine,” her tears swell, her chest rises and falls, “anybody else telling Eddie’s daddy this.”

“You haven’t told Walter yet?” her mother asks.

“No, Iris.” Zakiya’s father says, “she’s doing right. She tell Walter that while he’s out there on that road, Walter will surely run that truck into every ditch, and up every light pole from wherever he is to here.”

The paramedics prepare to transport Eddie. The grandmothers cannot be talked down from riding in the ambulance with him. Zakiya stays home and waits for Walter.

The grandfathers follow closely behind the ambulance in a car. Gordon solemnly looks at the late morning sun and watches the lights of the ambulance whirl. He listens to the siren scream, then sees Eddie’s face. He bangs his fist hard and steady against the

dashboard. Henry stops the car. He looks at Gordon's fist hitting the dashboard. The leather pops with each whack. Henry just puts his hands over his face and cries. Their pain together equals 140 years of experiences of all kinds—death, living, heartache, and injustice—but nothing, *nothing* has ever pained them, hurt their lives, and made them question their God like this.

***Sun. Moves. Slowly. Downward.***

From a distance, traveling down his dark and familiar road, Walter sees two extra cars in his driveway. *Ah, our parents are here*, he thinks, smiling excitedly. He watches the road and admires the moonlight covering the field, shining down on the house, making the rocks glow, the grass sheen. He sees the police officers coming down the road, but he doesn't think twice about it. His mother is famous for making pies and cookies for the officers. The entire force loves and respects her. *Hmm. They must've heard she was here*, he thinks. *As usual*, he just gives them a wave and keeps moving. He doesn't notice the disturbed look on each of their faces.

Walter walks in, smiles broadly, and announces, "Hey, hey! I'm so glad to see all of you. What a nice surprise!" He is so delighted to see them that the somberness of their mood doesn't register. He goes and gives his mother his signature tickle under her arm. She doesn't even smile, let alone gush into giggles the way she usually does. "Alright everybody, what's wrong?" Walter says while looking around the room. He thinks, *The house is in order, all my loved ones are here—except Baby Eddie*. Paranoia encroaches his mood, "Where's my boy?" Walter nervously asks.

Zakiya speaks up. "Walter, just wait a minute. Sit down first, honey."

Walter's eyes swell. His hands get big. "Nah, just wait a minute nothing. Where's

my boy?" He asks, losing his cool.

Walter's daddy steps in and says, "Son, please. Please sit down. You need to sit down first."

Walter looks into his father's eyes and sees something he has never ever seen before. It wasn't there when their house was completely consumed by fire or when his brother died. He looks around the room, looks into each of their faces and observes that whatever this thing is, is beyond sad, beyond the normal hum-drum, and goes beneath the regular turmoils of life. The thought of it, the thought of whatever it is drains him. He drops his attitude, goes over to the chair that's been pulled out for him, and sits down next to his standing wife.

"Somebody has molested our son, Walter."

Walter asks, "What did she say?" He heard the words, understood them, then didn't. Zakiya reluctantly repeats herself. .

Everybody's anguish ignites freely this time. They've been holding it at a simmer all day. Now, the feelings blaze. Their feelings boil. And Baby Eddie's daddy shudders and shakes. He falls on his knees and hollers, "Lord, Lord!" He rips his wife's skirt and yells, "My God!"

The men help him to his feet. The women cry. Walter stands up and looks at the pictures of his son on the walls: Eddie's kindergarten graduation, his first cupcake, his birthday at the beach, Eddie asleep on his mother's chest. "He's just a baa-by!" He screams. Walter, overcome by anger, hollers and runs around the room. His arms are bonfires. His legs are flames. "Not my boy! Not my son! Father! God have mercy!" He runs and screams. The words, embers in his bones, flare a rage that burns his skin. He

runs to put it out. He runs to cool the madness. All around the room, everyone cries. Then, he turns his anger against them. Where were you, Zakiya?! Why weren't you watching our son?! The questions, her husband's anger broke her heart.

Zakiya calmly said to Walter, "Husband, you know I love my baby more than life itself."

Both Zakiya's parents and Walter's parents agreed. Walter's father said to him, "Now, son, you know that's true. That's why you married her, 'cause you knew she'd be a great mother. This ain't no time to be turning on each other." Walter without speaking, goes over to his wife and holds her shivering body in his arms.

§

Shortly after they arrive home from the hospital, hours before Walter came in, Baby Eddie's paternal grandmother stuffed short pieces of cotton that she had prayed over into his ears. She knew his father would explode when he found out what happened, and she did not want Baby Eddie to hear his father coming apart.

Even in his sleep, with the cotton in his ears, Baby Eddie could make out his father's voice. He pulls the cotton out of his ears and hears his daddy screaming. Eddie sits on the side of his bed for a minute. His daddy in pain makes him feel weak. He thinks about what to do. He wipes his eyes, looks at the tears in his hands, and remembers the day his uncle John died. He envisions how sad his daddy was, how his daddy didn't feel better until the preacher sang. Eddie searches his mind for the words, then distinctly recalls that he'd been taught them. A smile covers his little lips. He clearly sees the June day when his daddy, Uncle John, Papa Henry, and Papa Gordon were standing around the grill singing the same song the preacher sang at Uncle John's funeral. He remembers how



the grannies joined in, and when his mama brought out the potato salad, she sang too. He chuckles when he recalls his daddy picking him up for the encore. And that's where he learned the hymn, "His Eye Is On The Sparrow," right there in his daddy's arms.

Eddie wipes his face, stands up on his little feet, and walks straight out into the living room. When everybody stops and looks at him, he opens his tiny mouth and sings just the way his daddy taught him.

§

Phones ring. Women's and men's voices exchange tidbits of information. "Did you hear that?" "I think that screaming came from the Redding's place." "I did see the police leaving from up there." "I think something happened over in that field."

Victoria hangs up the phone and goes to check on Mace. "Hey, Mace," she says, walking toward his bedroom with a freshly made sandwich atop a blue saucer. "Did you hear or see anything strange when you were out today? I heard something might have happened over at one of my neighbor's houses."

Victoria almost drops the saucer when she sees her nephew. The light from the hallway slices through his room and shines on his partially naked body. He is sitting on the floor in the darkest corner of the room. She walks over to him. "Nephew, what's wrong with you?" Mace's legs are drawn up to his chest. His eyes are streaming. "Mace, what happened?"

He doesn't say anything.

Victoria puts the saucer down and seats herself on the corner of the bed nearest to Mace. She sits with him, saying nothing for several minutes. She rubs his hair, massages his shoulders. Then, tells him about the day he was born, and how happy she was, how

she's known him for all his life and how nothing will ever make her stop loving him. She shares with him some of the information she's been learning her experiences from her atypical psychology and pathological processes courses. She tells him "studying people from all over the world, with every problem you can think of and some you can't imagine, has taught me to be helpful, open-minded and accepting of others in ways I thought I never could be."

Mace says nothing.

"Mace, what is it?" she asks him again. She waits, then encourages him, "Nephew, I'm your aunt. I care about you. I love you. We only got eleven years between us, whatever you're going through, I've probably been through it too. I can help you."

Mace's aunt's words are a balm to his troubled spirit. For so long, he's felt burdened by the weight of his secrets. He thinks about it. Victoria has always been so nice to him. She's been his best friend, his sister, his aunt, and sometimes his mother too. The thought of sharing this thing that has been gnawing at him and taking over his life makes him feel both heavier and lighter. Mace rubs his head and begins to cry. For some reason, in this moment, sitting in his aunt's house, he feels more reflective and conscious than ever. A sense of guilt begins growing in him as he looks at the *Bible* sitting on the nightstand and the black Serenity Prayer decal that has been smoothly applied onto her cool, gray accent wall.

The breaking point came when Victoria placed her hand on Mace's head and said, "Give it to God, Mace. He will see you through." Mace could no longer hold back. He put his forehead on his knees, wrapped his arms tighter around his legs, and told his aunt he was too weak, too disheartened and distraught to carry the evils of his life any further.

Without stopping to second guess himself, he told her exactly what he did to Baby Eddie.

His words sicken her. “Oh Lord,” she hisses. She wants to take her fists and beat him, beat him away from the devilment, beat him back into right thinking, beat him back into the nephew she knew. But she could not him, everything inside of her made her want to hit him, the same way her father used to hit her mother, the same way her mother hit her, but she could not bring herself to it. He was her nephew, the youngest son of her only sister and she knew that if she found a reason to raise her hand to hit him, she’d find reasons from now on to become the worst parts of her mother and father. She did not want that kind of life for herself, so she bit her lip hard, so hard it bled.

“Why? Mace, why?” She screamed as blood stained her teeth and seeped into the folds of her gum line.

“I don’t know, Auntie. I’m sick. It’s like something inside me takes over.”

She looks into his face and in that moment sees her sister and all the things that remind her of Nessa—all of the drugs, the bad choices, the men, the countless mood swings. Victoria tells Mace, “I remember when your mom and I were just children. I was only eight. Nessa was thirteen. I remember asking her, ‘What’s wrong with you, Nessa?’ You see, when she came out the bathroom, she was crying a little bit; shortly afterward, our old lowdown uncle came out of there too. At the time, I didn’t quite understand what was going on but I knew our uncle had no business in the bathroom with either one of us, especially while we were bathing. I remember Nessa crying all through the night that night. After that, life was not the same.”

Mace astonished said, “Uncle Reyvin touched my mama?”

Victoria ashamed to admit it, explains to Mace that their uncle touched a lot of

women and girls. He was a known womanizer and as he got older he became known as someone you did not want to leave your daughters around. Then, Victoria begins to cry. She said, “Mace, that was the first time that I knew of that something happened to Nessa, but it was not the last. After Reyvin started raping her, she became very depressed. She would sit alone in her room in the dark, even on the weekends, even when it was nice out, she would just sit in there.”

Mace asked, angry as hell, “Why didn’t someone do something? Where was grandma? Where was grandpa?”

Victoria says without blinking, “Your grandfather has always been a very closed off person. He has never really cared for anything or anybody. He provided for mama and us but that’s about it. He was there and not there, Mace. Honestly, the way daddy and Reyvin turned out, I am certain that they were abused. And my mother, God rest her soul, she was no more mentally prepared than us kids were. She was traumatized from her own abuse. She was in deep denial of everything. She couldn’t believe anything, she didn’t wanna see. It didn’t matter if something was happening right in her own face. But, Mace, you know me and you know I love my sister. Once, I knew what was going on, after Nessa finally told me, I pulled a knife on that rascal and told him if he ever touch my sister again I was gone kill him, daddy, and mama. I was screaming and hollin’ so loud the neighbors came to the door. That night, he was gone. I didn’t hear nothing else about him, ‘til they found him dead down there in Louisiana. ”

Mace rocks back and forth, clenches his fist, and grinds his teeth. He growls, “Tell me the rest.”

Victoria tells her nephew one of her most painful memories. She recalls the day

her mother called up to her high school and told them to send her home right away. When she got home her mom said, "I need you to babysit your nephew. I saw Nessa touching Mace in a way a mother shouldn't touch her child." Although Victoria tried, she could not find the words to describe to Mace how stunned and confused Nessa's actions left her. But being the good sister she's always been, from that day forth she did her best to care for Nessa and Mace as best a fourteen-year-old with dreams of getting far away from the craziness of her childhood could.

Mace screams "What about my brother? Did my mother do the same thing to him?"

Victoria puts his head on her lap, and tells him everything he had never heard before. She tells him how Charles, Nessa's first child, was the lucky one because his father took him when he was just three days old, and how no one knew anything about Charles because Nessa had him when she was fourteen. And because she had been hospitalized so much and never went to school regularly, nobody except the closest family members ever even knew she had been pregnant.

Victoria looks down upon Mace's face and sees deep pain. She says to him, to break up some of the awfulness of the moment, "After she had Charles and Reyvin got put in jail for domestic battery, Nessa was okay for a few years. She attended high school regularly. She was doing okay. She was even hanging out with some real nice dude. We never really knew his name. She called him K-Mac. Your mother was always very private and as to not send her over the edge we never pushed her on anything. For about two years or so she was doing great."

Then Victoria got quiet again. Mace says to her, "Go on, Auntie."

Victoria tells him how one day Nessa came home and she could see that the old sadness had come back. Victoria says, “I started asking around, because she was doing so good, ya know. At the time, she was hanging out some girl named Jaymel. They were real good friends. But one day, they just stopped hanging out. Another friend of ours said that Jaymel told Nessa something that messed her all up, but I never found out what it was. Shortly after that she slipped right back into that darkness and from what I can see, she’s never really bounced back.”

When Victoria said Jaymel, Mace became very alarmed. His body stiffened and his breathing became erratic. Victoria did not notice, so she continued talking. She said, “Next thing I knew, Nessa was pregnant, promiscuous, and had started smoking marijuana.”

Mace rolls off of his aunt’s lap and places his hands over his face. “Auntie,” he said, his voice shaking, “I know Jaymel.”

Victoria eyes widen. “How do you know her?” she asks.

“I was hanging out over at her place when I was in sixth grade. A bunch of us would go over there.”

Victoria, nervous, afraid of the answer asks, “What were y’all doing?”

Mace says, “At first, we were trying to help her find her husband. After she couldn’t find him she kinda started getting real attached to me.”

“Mace” Victoria says, “She’s your mother’s age.”

“I know, Auntie, but Jaymel ain’t nothing like Mama, she’s fun and she liked being with me. I didn’t think much of it, at first, because her daughter went to school with

us. I didn't know her daughter well or nothing, we really didn't talk to me much, 'cause she liked my boy, but I still hung out over there because I was with him."

Mace took a moment to think about what he said, and why he felt so drawn to Jaymel even though he knew, he felt something about her was very off. He thinks of all the times his mother fiercely refused to show him any affection, how she acted like it repulsed her to touch him. He thinks about all the confusion he's held and never voiced, how he knows his mother loves him, but never hugs him or kisses him or is tender with him. He thinks about how he's hated her for that. And he thinks about how that made him weak against Jaymel's advances.

Victoria stands up and says, "Nephew, tell me exactly what she did to you. I can tell by the look on your face something done happened."

Mace tells his aunt how Jaymel, on his eleventh birthday, showed him her breasts. She said it was his present. And how she'd make him touch her between her legs and how she would kiss him all over his body.

When Mace remembers Jaymel kissing him, he remembered how she begged and begged him to put his lips against hers. How she looked like she was about to cry if he did not do it. Then, he remembered how he felt with Baby Eddie, it was that same kind of intensity, that same level of sick want. Thoughts shuffle like cards in Mace's mind. He connects all of the things that happened to him to what he did to Eddie. He stands up, grabs his clothes and shoes, and shouts, "Auntie, you've got to get me out of here. I have to get some help."

Victoria says, "I know, Mace, I know."

He sees her wondering. "Auntie, just call the police."

The very mention of police causes her breath to freeze in her chest. Neither can stomach him being in jail.

They sit in silence. Mace removes his phone from his pocket. "I'll call them," he says. He dials 9. At that precise moment, Victoria, for some reason, remembers watching the *Color Purple*. As clear as a bell she can hear Sofia say, "I had to fight my daddy. I had to fight my uncles. I had to fight my brothers." Then, the scene, the scene with the white sheriff appears all around her. She sees the sheriff coldcock Sofia, knocking her flat on her back, dust flying, underclothing exposed. And that's exactly how Victoria was feeling right now. She was feeling that all the men who ever took from her, her sister, their mother, she felt that the evil spirits that dwelled in them were rising up and coming to take her nephew too.

Just a moment before Mace can press send, she snatches the phone out his hand and says, "The police won't be much help in getting your spirit restored and your behavior corrected. All the men and women who ever hurt our family had the police called on'em at one time or another, and I wish I could say that the help they provided was anything more than a temporary break from the madness they never stopped causing."

Mace ponders her words. He remembers the many faces he's seen through the years that started out bright and full of life that ended up tattooed and filled with death. He remembers hearing about the prison industrial complex, the jail rapes, the school to prison pipeline, and he remembers swearing he would never let that happen to him. He resolves in his heart that he needs help, but he also knows that being in jail holds more promise of making him worse than better.



Victoria explains her decision. She tells Mace how his great-grandfather left in and out of town his entire life evading angry women and fathers, and how the police would put him away and soon as he got out, he'd be right back at it. "He needed a support group and good strong righteous men to hold him accountable," she says. "You need that too, Mace." Victoria closes her eyes, puts her hand over her heart, and decides she's going to try and get her nephew the type of help the other troublesome men in her family never had. "Mace, I want you to see Dr. Mendi, first. He'll get you the treatment you need, get you into a small group, and possibly into residential care. Mendi also does spiritual counseling. You need that more than anything. But, promise me, if I get you to him, you'll tell the truth, you'll tell him exactly what happened and you'll do exactly as he tells you to do."

"Yes, Auntie, I will. I promise," Mace says fervently, sincerely.

Victoria gets up and says, "Okay, let me make a few phone calls." She stops suddenly. And yells, "Wait! Mace! You do know what you did is wrong, right? You know you hurt that little boy and his family? You know they'll never be the same again, don't you?"

Mace replies, "Yes. Auntie, I know."

Victoria turns completely away from the phone and continues, "Mace, really, you can't do that ever again. You have to stop it. Children are not sexual objects. They're not to be touched in that way. One of my favorite teachers, Professor Telayo, told me, 'Sexual abuse changes children at the molecular level, forever altering their personality.' She said, 'Feelings of humiliation and worthlessness haunt them for the rest of their lives.' And Mace, it has been well-documented that more than half of the women and girls who get involved in prostitution, who also have alcohol and drug addictions were

sexually abused as children and the same goes for men and boys. When people abuse children, just one time, can ruin their lives forever. Forever! And for those that don't get caught in street life, for many of them, the pain of their abuse stalks them to the day they leave this earth. A lot of the men and women from the case studies we've researched in class, report that they are still deeply hurting from things that happened to them thirty, forty years ago. The aftershock is devastating and long lasting, sexual problems, marital problems, low self-esteem, suicidal ideations, the destruction never stops."

Mace nods.

Victoria persists, "Mace, you have to take responsibility for what you have done. What you did today isn't Jaymel's fault, or your mother's fault, or your uncle's fault—what you did today was entirely you. Your family history may leave you susceptible to certain things, but it is up to you to control your behavior. You can control this. You have the power. Do you understand me?"

Mace answers, "Okay, Auntie."

Victoria, determined to make Mace face his actions, questions him and asks him to see himself in his behavior. She asks, "Mace, tell me the part you played in making today what it was?"

Mace nervously looks around. He has never seen his aunt so assertive. He quivers a bit and nervously says, "Well, I was there, and I did what I did."

Victoria, careful to not become too emotional, says in an even, measured tone, "Nephew, you have to give me a better answer than that. You have to have better answers for yourself. Which of your actions and thoughts brought you here to this moment? Tell me what's been happening in your mind."

Mace gives her a quizzical look and says, “My thought life. Over and over again, I’d replay all the things Jaymel did to me. Although I was afraid and nervous when it first started happening, it’s like I became addicted to the rush of it all. I’ve been with a few girls my own age and even some older, but nothing gave me that rush I felt when with Jaymel. You know when I was young and afraid. Not, until I started ...being her. Oh, God.” Mace stops, looks down at his hands, clasps them together, and says through chattering teeth, “Am I pedophile, Auntie? I heard someone screaming at Jaymel one time, calling her a pedophile. She was all drunk and high and stuff, and said, ‘Yeah, I’se likes ‘em young. So what?’” With that, Mace falls to his knees, inconsolable.

Victoria stands him to his feet, “Nah-uh,” she said, “This ain’t no time to be falling apart. Tell me about your thought life. That’s one of the things behind this—that’s how you feed it—with your thoughts.

Mace’s face tenses, new tears form, his lips purse and his eyebrows draw together. He mutters, “What?”

“Do you have sexual dreams and fantasies about children?!” she yells.

“Yes. But what does that have to do with anything?”

“A lot, Mace!” Victoria screamed “That means you’re going all the way, so to speak. You’re seeing your fantasies through to the very end. That means you’re gonna have to break the habit of connecting those thoughts and actions to the very addictive physical pleasure you get when you orgasm. ‘Cause after while, if you don’t correct that, there’ll be nothing you can do without having to have them demonic damn thoughts first.”

Mace with pure consternation on his face says, “Oh no, that’s already started. I used to be cool when I was with my girlfriend. Then after time went by, I had to think about ... well, you know what I had to think about to get it up, you know. But what scared me the most, Auntie, was I used to have to smoke some weed or drink before I...touched a kid, but lately, I don’t need to do that at all. I can be in my right mind and do it.”

Victoria proudly looks at her nephew, tells him he’s brave for being so honest, lets him know she’s not judging him, and encourages him to go on.

“Well, recently,” Mace says, “I been going to chat rooms, watching porn, sexting. It’s completely taken over my life.”

Victoria pays attention to the way his voice trailed off, and sees a new layer of shame cross his face. She knows that now is the time to give him the hard facts of his actions, while he still has the decency to be ashamed. Victoria abruptly says, “Mace, I have this book, it’s called *Predators, Pedophiles, Rapists and Other Sex Offenders*. It was written by psychologist Dr. Anna C. Salter. I’ll give you a copy. Now, I don’t agree with everything written in the book but she made a good point that has stuck with me. She said: ‘The cornerstones of [deviant sexual behavior] are distorted thinking and...fantasies. These fantasies play an enormous role in the development of compulsive [deviant sexual behaviors.]’ Mace, you see, what happens is this: First, you start out just dreaming and thinking about deviant behaviors. Then you start fantasizing and masturbating to them. And generally, what people don’t understand is masturbation is addictive. It’s just like a drug. It is dynamic, all addictions are, all addictions progress. And it is inherent in their progression to tire of what once sufficed, and constantly require

more. Do you know how a drug addict will talk about having a monkey on his/her back?"

"Yeah."

"Well, a sex addict does too. Over time, sex addicts require wilder and wilder fantasies to feel their high. What is dangerous about this in your case, or in the case of any person who is a sex offender, is that you are feeding a desire that leads to criminal actions that are immoral, and harmful to all around you."

Mace stands up. "You have my word, Auntie, I don't want what is happening to me to happen to anyone else. Please put me in touch with Mendi."

Victoria makes the necessary phone calls. She calls Dr. Mendi, and tells him her nephew needs an appointment immediately. Mendi agrees to see Mace. Victoria makes arrangements to get Mace on the next train out of Carbondale. She schedules him to leave on the 3:16 A.M. Amtrak train that arrives in Chicago at 9 A.M. Dr. Mendi says, "I'll pick him up at Union Station."

§

Rain falls from Carbondale's big, dark, starry sky. Soft and heavy it falls against their faces as they say goodbye on the train's platform.

"Auntie, thank you," Mace says.

Tears and raindrops drip one after another from Victoria's nose when she tells him, "You're my nephew, Mace, my sister's baby. I can't help but love you. I can't help but help you. But know this, I'm tracking this train, and I'm calling Mendi exactly ten minutes after it arrives, if you're not with him, I'm calling the police. And know this too, nephew, I will testify against you."

Mace picks his aunt up one last time, kisses her on the cheek, and promises he'll

keep his word.

Victoria gives him the book, holds his hand and says, "I'll always love you, no matter what."

§

Victoria watches him board the train, waves at him until he is no longer in sight, and stands perfectly still, in the spot where he left her, until the rumbling mechanical sounds of the bus can't be heard anymore.

Victoria's walk back to her car is tiresome, wearisome, soul-crushing. With Mace gone, her mind focuses clearly, solely on Baby Eddie. Each step she takes is heavy with guilt, grief, confusion. Her stride becomes stumbles. She is careful not to let her feelings overwhelm her before she gets inside the car. During her drive home, feelings barge forward. Baby Eddie becomes a pain in her heart. *Dear God*, she thinks. Victoria feels every misery from every day of her life eat at the marrow in her bones. She throws up twice before she arrives home.

Six hours after her nephew left, nine-o'clock came and went. Mendi looks for Mace, he cannot find him. Victoria calls Mace's phone, it goes straight to voicemail. She purposely charged his phone before he left, for this very reason. She gave Mace a picture of Mendi, and text a picture of Mace to him. So she knows there is no reason they should have not connected. After calling the Reddings and telling them what she knew, and calling the police and telling them all she knew, she unlocks her door, lays on her couch, and takes her last breath.

§

The city is warm and noiseless on the morning of July tenth at 9:15 AM.

Chicago's Union Station usually abuzz with activity and people at this hour, but today it is uncommonly quiet. Mace walks through the long, wide, shining corridors of the station as if they were the green mile. All night long, for the entire six-hour train ride from Carbondale to Chicago, the sound of his aunt's voice, and her admonitions accosted him. He still could not believe all that had happened. He pushes through the glass doors and steps into the vestibule. He sees a luxury automobile parked directly across the street. It is Dr. Mendi. He is just as Aunt Victoria said he would be, in a white shirt with a tan tie, driving a gray car. Mace paced in the vestibule. Mace tugs and squeezes the straps of his backpack as he walked back and forth. *I'm a pedophile*, he thinks and shakes his head.

Dr. Mendi checks his watch and opens his car door. *Oh Auntie Victoria, you should've come with me*, Mace says aloud to himself—as he runs against the wind into the opposite direction of his promise.

## §

Out of breath, he stops. He walks to Millennium Park, all along thinking, *I'm A sex offender? A pedophile?* He has considered the same thought so many times his head fills full, congested. He needs a distraction. He takes out his phone and calls his brother.

"Hello," Mace says as he puts his backpack down on the cool, smooth concrete.

"Can you hear me?"

"Yeah, I can hear you," his brother Charles says. "Where are you?"

"I'm downtown," Mace says while laying on the ground with his head on his backpack and his arms across his chest.

"Downtown Chicago? I thought you were at Aunt Victoria's."

"Yeah, I was, but I'm back here now, hanging out at the bean."

Charles, a bit indignant, says, “You mean the Cloud Gate. I hate when people call it the bean. Calling it the bean will never remind you about the experience of how reflection can change perspective.”

“Whatever, nerd boy. What’s up with you?”

“I’m okay. The question is, what’s up with you? You’re not supposed to be back for weeks. I know you and Victoria are like two peas in a pod. What happened? Is she okay?”

“I just came back early is all. Auntie is fine. Auntie living it up as usual. Ms. Diva.” Mace says and coughs loudly.

“Early?” Charles says, not hiding his suspicion. Feeling that he will not get any straight answers, he begins asking more questions. “You still got that stinking cough? That thing sounds even more awful than last time. What did Victoria say about it?”

“She just told me to keep an eye on it.” Mace sighs deeply and continues, “I’m just calling you to get away for a minute. Why you all on my back?”

Charles, with his suspicions confirmed, pushes a little harder, “Dude, get away from what? Remember who you’re talking to. You know I hear everything and infer with the quickness. If you called me, you got something on your mind you need to talk about. Just say it. Don’t make me call down there.”

Charles’s last statement alarms Mace. He had not considered word getting back to Chicago and the ramifications of that. He instantly lightens his mood. “Charles, you know if something was up with Auntie, that whole town would have called up here.”



Charles laughs, knowing what he says is true. “You ain’t never lied about that.” Feeling less jovial and more definite, “Okay now, I know, whatever problem you got is yours. Tell me what’s going on right now.”

Feeling pressured, near ready to crack, Charles fires back, “Listen man, I’m straight. I just wanted to talk to my brother for a damn minute!”

Charles, never having been one to tolerate disrespect, says coolly and definitely, “I’m done trying to help you. I’ll just leave you with a few words of advice, whatever problem you got little brother, do not let it fester. Talk to somebody. Seek out wise counsel.” Charles then pauses and listens for Mace’s reaction.

Mace’s mind races, but his lips remain still. He thinks: *tell him about Eddie; tell him about being a pedophile. Ask him to go with you to Dr. Mendi.* His conscience directs him, but he doesn’t comply.

Silence persists past the boundaries of what is sane before Charles speaks again. He says, “Hey, Mace. Dr. King said, ‘a time comes when silence is a betrayal.’ If something is bothering you and you’re not reaching out and getting help—you’re betraying yourself.” Charles gives Mace a few more seconds, still he says nothing, so he continues, “Okay, well, I hope you have the courage to do the right thing and get yourself whatever help you need. If you need it, google mental health and your zip code. If you need the police. They are everywhere so I don’t need to tell you about them. If you need support, there are all kinds of Anonymous groups: sex, drugs, alcohol, emotions, you name it they got it.”

Charles pauses again to give his brother some space and time to respond. Mace just breathes.

“Okay, Mace, you better go. I heard a storm’s coming. As you carry on with your day, just know, there’s nothing new under the sun. No one’s so bad off that they cannot come back, cannot be redeemed, if they have the will to change.”

After another long pause, finally Mace says something, “Hey, Charles. I’m looking in this Cloud Gate thing, you’re right, I see a big ball of dark clouds in the distance. You’re right about the perspective to. I look so small and my shadow it looks so big, big and dark.”

Charles sighs. He hears Mace’s struggle. But knowing he can do nothing without his cooperation, just bids him farewell. He says, “All right, little brother, you better take cover and be safe. I’ll be here if you want to come over.”

“Okay, maybe I’ll see you later,” Mace says, both know he’s lying.

Charles reassures him anyway and says, “Seriously, if you need me. I’m here.”

“I know,” Mace says, “Take care. You’re a good big brother.”

Mace hangs up without saying another word. He stares into Cloud Gate a little longer. He tries to recall what Charles said about Dr. King. It doesn’t work. He tries to think of whether or not he should call his Aunt Victoria, but the thought will not stay put long enough for him to make a decision. He looks at the clouds—they look like a gigantic gray comforter floating through the sky. He looks back at his own reflection, wrestles with his thoughts, then gives in. A sinister look crosses his reflection. He picks up his backpack and throws it in the trash. His neck sweats. His hips feel oily. Over his shoulder, the small face of a young brown boy is on Crown Fountain. Mace tightens his laces, and gives Cloud Gate one last glance, behind him the brown boy’s face frowns. A deeper darkness drifts over Mace’s image, it consumes his reflection, fills his mind, then

extinguishes the little bit of light that shines between where he's standing and the approaching storm.

§

Mace has been walking the streets of Chicago for three days. This morning he feels especially strange. He's afraid his mind has finally turned into mother's. He thinks over and over again about Baby Eddie and his dead aunt. When Charles called him a few hours after they spoke and told him his aunt was dead and that the police were looking for him, Mace hung up on him and threw his phone into a dumpster. The weight of his guilt plunged him deep into a state of hallucination inducing unawareness. At this point, Mace is slumming from place to place, sleeping here and there. It is clear to anyone who sees him that he is a young man who has completely fallen apart. From the moment he found out his aunt died, he felt in his heart what he'd done had killed her.

Without intention, Mace ends up in the sight of his ex-girlfriend Charlotte. A girl of inordinate kindness, she was the first person to hear his voice since he'd gone dumb. He tells her about his aunt's death and stopped just short of the reason why he felt she's died. Charlotte knows in her spirit, she can discern from the way Mace is speaking and moving that he feels have in some way felt responsible for his aunt's death. From the time he zombie walked into her line of vision early that morning, into the late afternoon, she has been sitting with him mostly in silence.

After seeing how peculiar Mace has been acting for the last several hour, Charlotte's mother finally grows tired of his strangeness and says in a false hushed tone, "Get that boy away from here. He's giving off an awful energy." Charlotte begs and pleads with her mother to let Mace stay a while longer so she can talk to him and help

him figure out a plan, but her mother does not budge.

She says, “Charlotte, dear, he is on his way to his destiny. There’s no amount of planning in the world that’s gonna stop that. Let him go on.”

Charlotte reluctantly stops pleading. She knows from the look in his face and how different he was just nine months ago that whatever has had happened to Mace has changed him forever. Charlotte says to her mother, “Mom, just let me walk him to the bus stop. I know his brother lives somewhere near along the 20 Madison bus line. Just let me walk him to the bus and put him on it and maybe, he’ll make his way to his brother’s place.”

Before agreeing, her mother estimates the three-block walk, how much time it will take to get there and back, and explains to her how she has exactly twenty minutes to be on her way back home. Charlotte is arm-in-arm walking with Mace down the street within seconds of promising to return on time.

§

Mace heard what Charlotte and her mother said. Charlotte’s mother’s words effectively caused paranoia and a cold sweat. Suddenly, Mace is shivering and to everyone around them it is apparent something is deathly wrong. He manages to mumble, “Charlotte, I feel like something’s after me.”

Charlotte quickens her pace and says, “Mace, just relax, please go to your brother’s.” She reaches for his hand but he pulls it in the opposite direction. Being touched is not what he needs. Every brush of their hand reminds him of Eddie and he is repulsed by the connection to that and his aunt’s death.

They finally arrive at their destination. Charlotte watches Mace. His head is

drenched and he is pacing. The way he keeps rocking his head back and forth as if to communicate no is making her uneasy. He is becoming more unstable by the moment and she now finds herself desperate searching for the bus so she can put him on it and be done with this matter. *C'mon 20*, she thinks. Just to calm her own anxiety, she closes her eyes to keep from being overwhelmed with his odd and ominous energy.

Before her eyes can rest, Mace yells, "The bus is coming!" Charlotte's eyes open and immediately focus on two imposing figures quickly advancing in their direction. At first she thought they were just hurrying for the bus, but then she saw their eyes locked on Mace as if he was their target. Two black men, then three, were just milliseconds from them. Charlotte does her best to hurry the unsuspecting Mace onto the bus. In an instant, she is pushed aside and Mace is in their grasp.

Charlotte watches as Mace with one foot on the stair of the bus and the other on the ground falls onto his back. The men's fists explode onto his face, chest, arms, and neck. As if in slow motion, she watches as the men's knees bend and their legs raise and the whites of their gym shoes kick Mace with combustion and cause his body to jump and jerk with great commotion.

"What are ya'll doing?! What is going on?!" Charlotte screams.

The sound of Charlotte's voice causes Mace to open his eyes. He listens as curses jet out from their mouths, crisscross, and flit through the air. Mace notices that one of the attackers looks vaguely familiar. He's the angriest of the three. He grabs Mace around the neck with his hands and pushes his fingers deep into his neck. His palms filled with the steam of anger loosen the breath from his body.

"No, no!" Charlotte yells.

As Mace fades from consciousness he sees all the faces of the children he's touched during the last year. Their faces are stained with tears, their hearts beat loudly in their chests. Mace cries out to their faces, "I'm sorry. I didn't want to be what I was. I didn't want to be a pedophile." Eons from Mace's mind, outside of his body, Charlotte screams, and the men continue beating him. Their fists and feet against his face make cracking, popping, flat, slapping sounds. Their punches, kicks, and grunts form a chord. Their shoes against his head, ribs, and shoulders rattle his organs. From among the faces of the children he's violated, Baby Eddie's spirit comes to him. Baby Eddie is dressed in his Sunday's best, the ghost of his spirit kneels beside Mace's body, holds his hand. The men kick and punch through Eddie. Eddie smiles unscathed. "Call on Him," Eddie's small voice said, "repent, Mace." "Knock and the door shall be answered" (Luke 13:25). With broken teeth and a swelling jaw, Mace moans, "Please heal the children I harmed, Lord. Please forgive me for all the things I've done." In this realm, Charlotte screams a dreadful, non-human, primal, incomprehensible combination of yelps and yells. Mace's attackers synchronize their movements. They stomp, tear, and pummel. With each connection, their fists get tighter, their feet kick harder. Kick, punch, slam, hit, kick, slap, punch. Mace knows this will be his final resting place and allows every thought held in place by normal everyday existence to expand and unfurl.

Before the vision Mace sees changes, before Eddie leaves, Eddie prays for Mace. Prays for his soul. The vision of Eddie is then replaced by a supernatural vision of this world. Mace sees the color of the men's skin flash, they become skin, muscles, blood, organs, bones, then skin again. On their veins processions of women, men, and children scream. In their blood, people of every color cry out tormented by the same pedophilic

spirit that ravaged Mace's life. They cry out in languages known and unknown. The angriest of the men appear in the spiritscape before Mace. He is an angel, who is both man and woman, infant and child. In his hand is a great whip. Before thrashing out the last breath from Mace's body, the angel said, "Your life was not lived in vain."

13.

Kevin lowered the book. Cakey, Tira, and BarLee stare at him, breathless. BarLee asked Kevin, "How did you read straight through like that? I wanted to stop you so many times and ask if you were okay, if you needed a break." Kevin said, while looking at the sun setting around them, "I had to know. I had to learn the lesson of my son's life. I could not let fear, rejection, the judgment of others, anything prevent me from making good on all the bad. And honestly, after having felt all he felt and going through all the things he's been through, the worst part was the becoming. The level of confusion, anguish, and turmoil in his life was oppressive, mutative; and for me, personally, intolerable. My heart goes out to him. My heart goes out to my son. But glory to God for his story and the ability to share it others—that is the victory."

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